STREET AND SMITH'S

WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE

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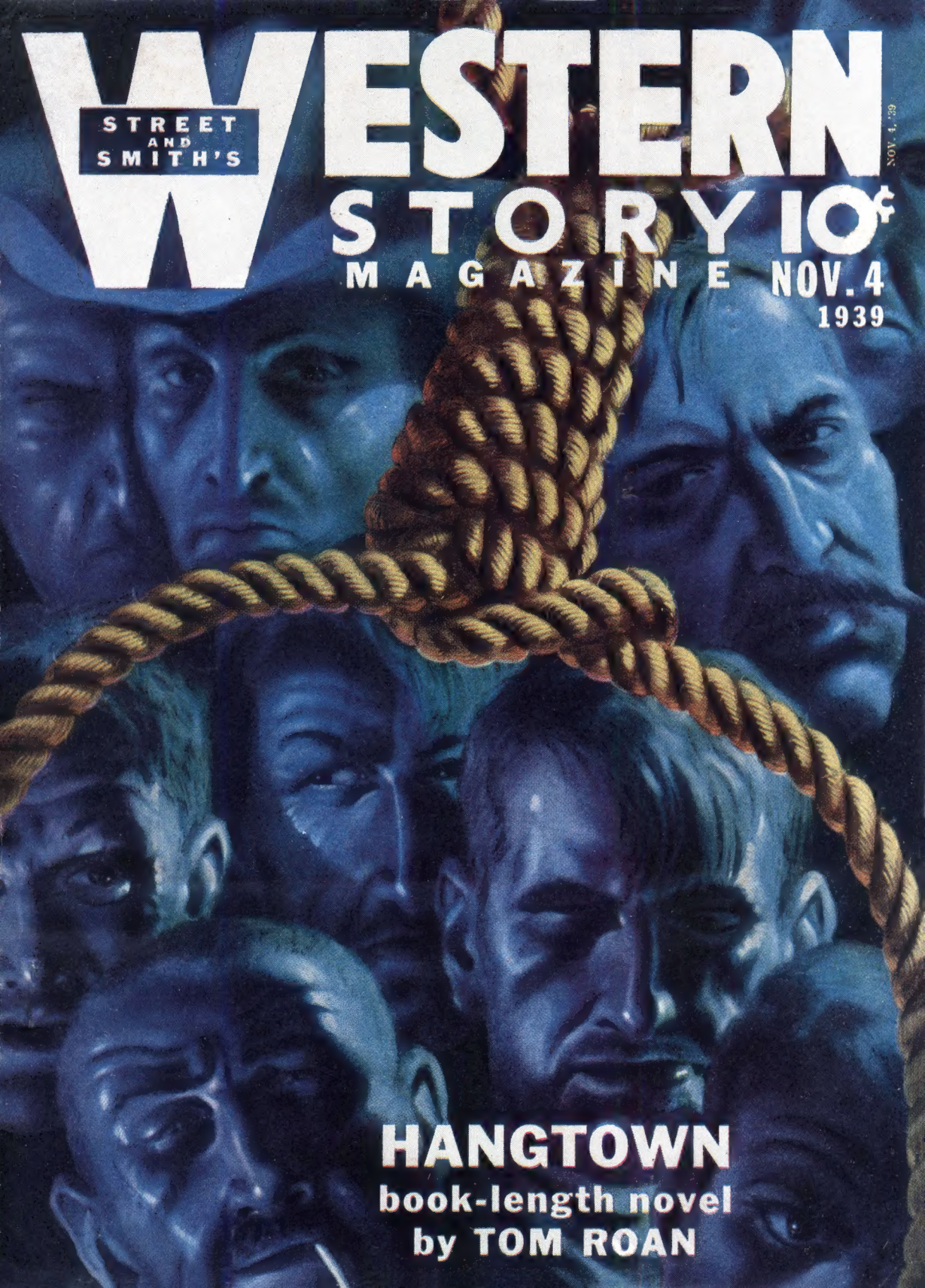

HANGTOWN

book-length novel

by TOM ROAN

A YEAR AGO HE WAS SET TO BE FIRED

... NOW HE'S RIGHT-HAND-MAN TO THE BOSS!

"YES sir," continued Joe, "his desk used to be right next to mine—now look where he is."

Half proudly and half enviously he and Frank watched Ed as he swung down the company steps, his arm linked in that of J.P., the head of the firm. Ed is getting $7,500 a year now, while Joe at $5,000 is a long way ahead of Frank, a newcomer.

"Boy, he must be plenty smart," said Frank.

"Plenty smart is right," said Joe. "Ed has a lot on the ball, but in spite of that he was slated to go."

"For what?" Frank wanted to know. "A guy like that . . ."

"Well, maybe you wouldn't believe it, but it was his breath . . ."

"Drank a lot, eh?"

"Not Ed. Never a drop, but most of the time he had a case of halitosis* that would knock you down."

"One of those birds, eh? Didn't he read the Listerine Antiseptic ads. Didn't anybody tip him off?"

"Sure, I tipped him off, but not before he almost got the toss. You see, Ed had to see an awful lot of people—close contact stuff. At first they never said anything about it, but later on that breath of his was getting him in bad with his customers. Finally a few of the crustier ones began to write in, complaining, and at last J. P. himself got on to it."

"You'd think J.P. would say something . . . a good man like Ed."

"I understand he did, Frank. Maybe he didn't make it plain enough. Anyhow Ed never took a tumble—and his job hanging in the balance."

"Chump!"

"You said it. But there's hundreds like him; suspecting everybody but themselves."

"Well," demanded Frank, "what happened?"

"I got Ed out one night. After a couple of drinks, to give me courage, I let him have the bad news about that breath of his. Told him he better get going on Listerine and keep it up if he wanted to stay on with the firm."

"You certainly didn't pull your punches."

"I certainly didn't. And boy, was he sore at first. And then grateful. Worked my hand up and down like it was a pump handle. Since then you never saw a guy so careful about the impression he makes on others."

Frank nodded. "The last place I worked, they were plenty fussy about that sort of thing. I think every firm should have a standing order 'Listerine Antiseptic before you call on a customer.' I guess it pays."

"And how! If you think it didn't, just look at Ed; he sure is going places."

***Nobody is immune!** Everybody probably has halitosis (bad breath) at some time or other without realizing it. That's the insidious thing about this offensive condition. Sometimes halitosis is due to systemic conditions, but usually and fortunately it is caused, say some authorities, by fermentation of tiny food particles in the mouth. Listerine quickly halts such food fermentation and then overcomes the odors it causes. Your breath becomes sweeter, purer, less likely to offend. Always use Listerine before business and social engagements. Lambert Pharmacal Co., *St. Louis, Mo.*

BEFORE YOU GO TO WORK, USE LISTERINE FOR HALITOSIS (BAD BREATH)

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to Run a Fine Paying Local COFFEE ROUTE

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In addition to your fine cash earnings, you can get many delicious food products and over one hundred other household necessities for your own use at wholesale prices—so you can **save** money as well as **make** money.

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This is a sincere, bonafide offer made by a big, reliable, old-established company operating from Coast to Coast. Write at once for full particulars. Unless you take advantage of my remarkable Free Outfit Offer now, you may be missing the very money-making opportunity you have been looking for. Strike out for yourself! Be independent! Make money! Enjoy life! Remember—you don't send me a penny. Just fill out and send the coupon and I will mail you full particulars. Do this TODAY!

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Name.....

Address.....

.....

(Please Print or Write Plainly)

STREET & SMITH'S

WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE

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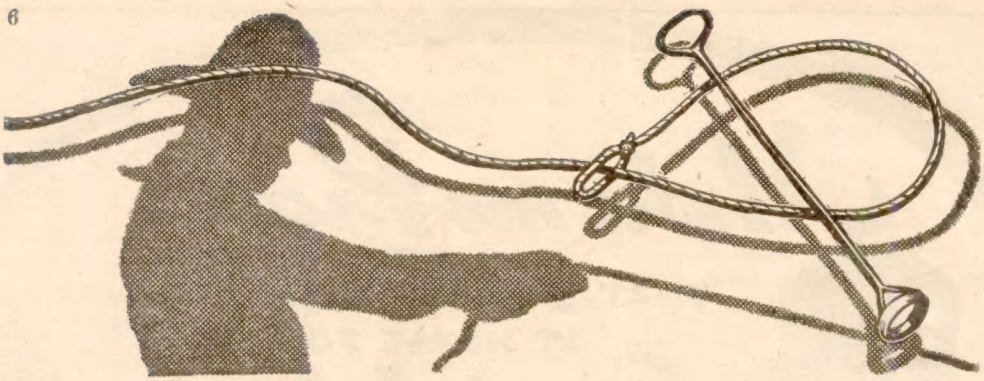

The Roundup

As we mentioned in this column some weeks ago, our Mines and Mining expert, John A. Thompson, is at present down in Kingman, Arizona, and a letter just received described what is, to us, at least, a new wrinkle in rodeos. During the Labor Day week end, not only the cattlemen of Mohave County, but the miners as well, took part in a celebration which is known as "Dig 'n' Dogie Days"—a roundup of mine and cattle sports. There were entrants for State amateur championships from Lower California and Nevada as well as Arizona.

In addition to the familiar bucking contests, calf tying, wild-cow milking, steer riding, roping, et cetera, there were prize events held in rock drilling, both singlejack and doublejack and with machine drill. There was also a mucking contest which called for mucking from a slick sheet into the ore car, tramming and dumping, as well as many other unusual and interesting competitions.

Mohave County is the most richly mineralized area in the State as well as the most prosperous mining community, so that it was only natural that the mining and milling events were included in these State championships. We understand that there was also a parade of the local people as well as the contestants in their colorful Western and prospectors' garb. Yes, sir, this sure is a new angle on rodeos!

Thompson, who was one of the judges in the mining events, reports that there was a thrill a minute and an abundance of Western hospitality.

In next week's issue—

Folks who've been complaining that we haven't given them enough Walt Coburn lately will be glad to know we've scheduled one of this old-timer's saltiest, and most exciting stories. GUN WOLVES OF THE BADLANDS, the featured novel in our next issue, is the pulsing, dramatic story of the strangest partnership ever seen in the Montana badlands, that of a gun-scarred outlaw and a kid who spooked at his own shadow, but who wanted, more than anything else in the world, to be a fighting curly wolf.

Besides this fast-paced novel, there'll be a whole string of top-hand fiction, interesting fact articles about the true West, and, of course, the usual helpful and informative departments.

BOY_IT'S GREAT TO FEEL LIKE THIS!

DO YOU "feel like a million bucks"? Does your body tingle with glorious glad-to-be-alive zip, tireless energy—smashing strength and driving power surging through every muscle and sinew?

It's GREAT to feel like THAT! And it's great to have—BEHIND IT—a muscular, perfectly-developed body that others envy and admire. There's a personal magnetism that it seems to "send out" too! It *draws* people to you—wins friends—better jobs—respect. It's hard to beat a man—*in anything*—when he FEELS in the PINK OF CONDITION. And when he has a build which broadcasts that fact to *everyone!*

Untouched photo of Charles Atlas, twice winner of title, "World's Most Perfectly Developed Man"

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This cup, 14" high, on a mahogany base, will be awarded to pupil who makes greatest physical improvement in the next 3 months.

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Just one thing comes between 'em!

SO often you see Dad and Son helping themselves from the same big red tin of Union Leader. Dad tamping it into his pipe. Son rolling it into crisp, fresh cigarettes.

Dad's tried 'em all—but for sheer, downright mellowness and soul-satisfying flavor, he always comes back to Union Leader's hill-grown Kentucky Burley! Son, though he's new to smoking, likes the bland mildness and freedom from bite that are due to Union Leader's long-aging and special processing.

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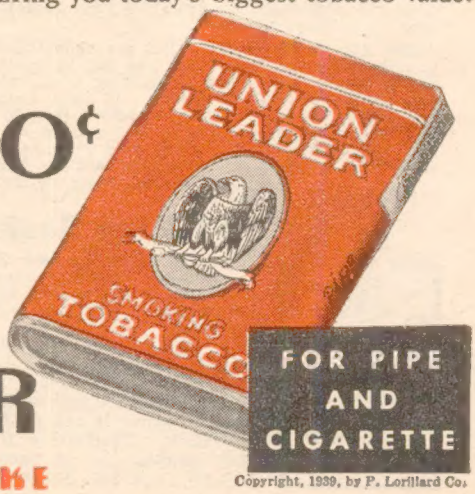

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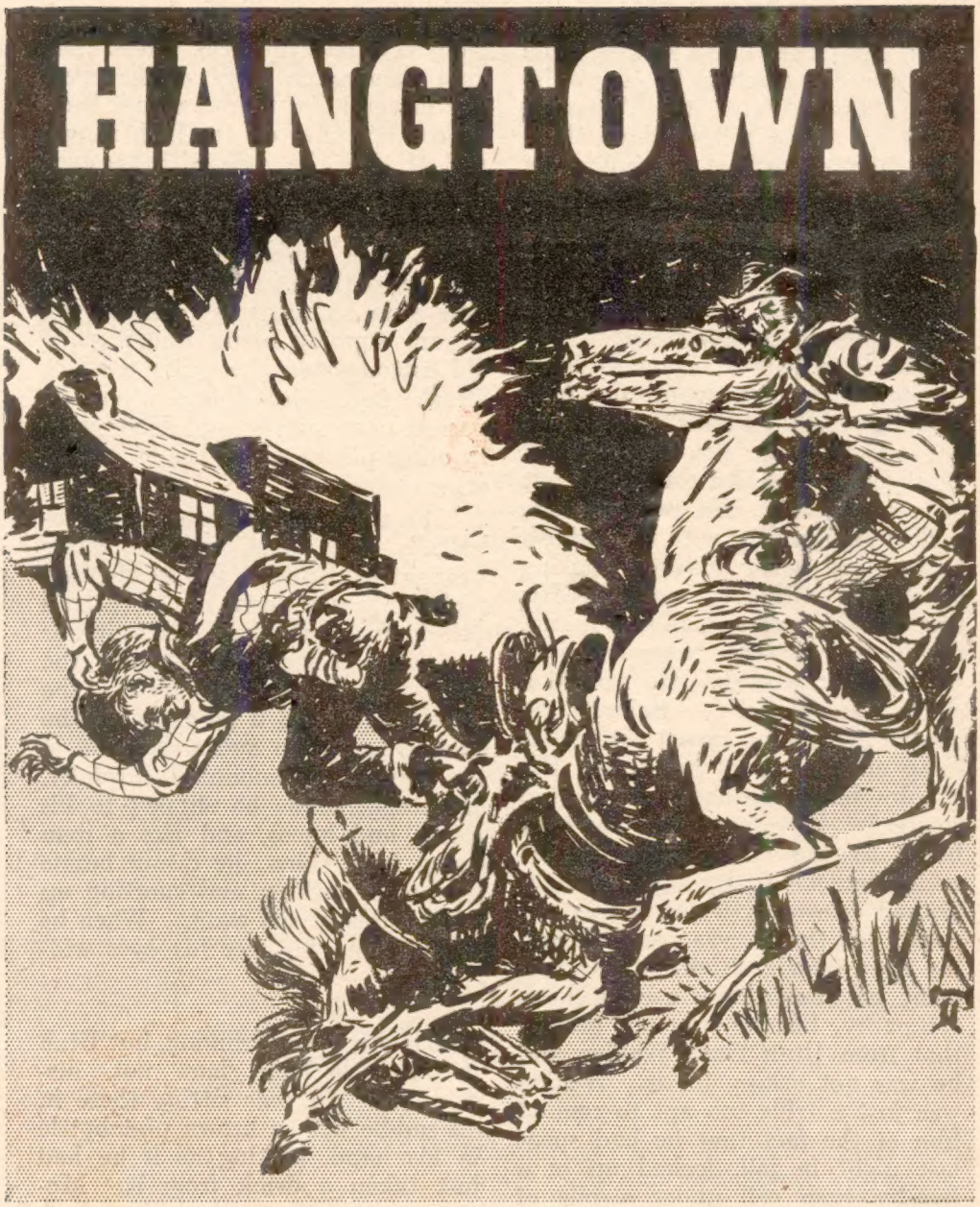
HANGTOWN



by TOM ROAN

CHAPTER I

DEATH SWINGS

THE two men rode with the brims of their big hats pulled down to shield their eyes from the lowering sun. For hours neither had spoken. It was too hot for small talk. In addition, Booger Bill McBride had a hang-over and was suffering the pangs of an empty pocketbook, a blistered mouth and a stomach that

rolled and jerked like a kicking mule from a week's spree on bootleg whiskey in Lone Water, the Wyoming cow town thirty miles behind them that they had left at the invitation of a sheriff and a delegation of stanch citizens whose nerves and patience had been worn out by the capers of the worst hell-lifting drunk who had visited himself upon the community in twenty years.

Compared to Utah Dave Weldon, the tall man in gray on the fast-stepping black saddler just to the left of the old flea-bitten roan, McBride looked like something out of a nightmare. He was a short, bullish man of fifty with the reddish half moons below his eyes looking as if they had been scalded. His hair was thin and red, and his round, fist-mashed face was the color of an overripe strawberry. He needed a shave, he needed a haircut; he needed everything except the tender lump on the top of his head. His shabby black clothes were all too small for him from the run-over boots to the floppy-brimmed hat with a bullet hole through the high-peaked crown. His thirst was ungodly; his throat was parched, and his eyes ached. Right at the moment he could have used a little sympathy, but he was not getting that from Utah Dave Weldon and he was not asking for it. Weldon was just a trifle too apt to remind him of the fact that he had spent last night in jail, locked up in a five-by-seven cell under a pile of four drunken Mexican sheepherders and a one-eyed Basque bull cook who had all the signs of a man suffering from the seven-year itch.

McBride did not see the rim of Thunder River Canyon ahead of them until they were right upon it. He did not see anything but those sun-blazed Wyoming hills, the dazzling sky, and the heat waves that kept dancing in front of his eyes. For fifteen miles there had not been a drop of water on the high range, and at times he rode with his eyes closed to keep out the blinding glare.

The river appeared suddenly. It was down there in the deep-walled, mile-wide canyon; a shimmering stream slipping along under giant old cottonwoods, the water a silver streak here and there where it passed over shoals, and blue pools in other places where the river bed grew deeper.

"It's a picture for pore achin' eyeballs." The sight of the water brought McBride to life as his roan picked his way down the steep trail behind Weldon's black. Here it was cool with a light wind under the trees. McBride rode on to the river's edge. As if he expected the ground to fly up and strike him in the face, he dismounted carefully. He staggered as he slipped to his hands and knees, and like a man dying from thirst, he drank beside his horse, sucking and snorting up great gulps of the water. When he stumbled to his feet his eyes widened.

THE black was drinking, but Utah Dave Weldon had not dismounted. He was sitting there in his saddle with a brown pint bottle in his hand, looking as if he had just taken a drink from it. McBride moved toward him like a bear ready to spring to an attack.

"Gimme, Utah!" His voice was one of thirst and desperation, his eyes shining with anxious expectancy. "Gimme that bottle! Man, I'm dyin'!"

As if he did not hear, Weldon kept the bottle resting on his knee, his

eyes staring at something across the river. It was an opportunity. McBride leaped. With both hands he snatched the bottle from Weldon's hand and leaped back. Quickly he swung the bottle to his lips, swallowing its contents in deep gulps. Then, suddenly, he froze in his tracks. It was nearly twenty seconds before he could catch his breath long enough to hurl the bottle away from him and speak.

"Yuh . . . yuh pizened me!" he gasped, gripping the pit of his stomach with both hands. "Yuh . . . yuh've killed me. What . . . what in hell was in that bottle, Utah?"

"Castor oil, Booger," Weldon answered casually. "It's good medicine for a drunk."

Something hit the ground. Weldon looked around quickly. Old Booger Bill McBride was rolling and twisting on the ground like a dying bull snake.

Weldon dismounted and allowed the horses to graze and rest before pushing on up the trail to Rattleweed, the little town five miles to northward that they had been heading for before McBride had pulled off his spree in Lone Water.

As for McBride, he was absolutely certain that he was going to die. He was groaning and praying when he heard a hellish rattling and clattering that made him fear that he had swallowed a stack of tin pie pans somewhere in his wild spreeing in Lone Water.

He stood up suddenly, both hands still at the pit of his stomach. It was then that he saw the maker of the noise. It was a huge old wagon drawn by two big, shaggy gray horses, a covered wagon that glistened like a thousand eyes in the sun from shiny new pots and pans hanging to the sides of it. McBride stared at it for a full minute, and his eyes kept widening.

"I've got 'em ag'in, Utah." He half turned his head to look at Weldon, who was now sitting in the grass and resting comfortably with his back to the bole of a cottonwood. "I'm seein' 'em, not the pink elephants, but—"

"It's a tin peddler." Weldon was looking at the approaching sight. "Get back in the grass there and keep your mouth shut. Don't go starting an argument when the wagon drives up."

McBride shook his head and kept staring. There was a man on the right side of the wagon's rickety old seat, a long-necked, hatchet-faced individual of about sixty with a straggly iron-gray beard, a pair of ogling green goose eyes, a floppy brown hat, brown boots, and a ginger-brown suit several sizes too large for him.

BUT it was not the man who held McBride's attention. It was the animal on the front seat beside the man. It was a hog, a black hog sitting there on the wagon seat like a dog with a thin railing around him to keep him from tumbling off when the old wagon rolled down rough trails.

McBride took off his old hat, scratching his head, his sickness momentarily forgotten. "I've seen a heap in my day, Utah," he said solemnly, "but this beats me." Then his voice lifting into a yell, he greeted the newcomer. "Howdy, Solomon! Pull up yore chariot an' alight."

"O-o-o-e-e-ee!" The voice of the man on the wagon was mournful as he pulled on his lines and the shaggy grays came to a lazy halt. "The name ain't Solomon, stranger. First

name's Jasper, an' the last's Barker."

"An' I reckon the fella on the seat with yuh"—McBride came forward a few paces—"must be one of the younger generation of the Barker family?"

"Yore manners ain't anythin' to boast about." Jasper Barker's voice still carried that sad twang as he sat there slumped on the seat. "My pard's called Snorky. The more I see of fellas like yuh, the more I enjoy his company. Need any pans, pots, or skillets, friend? I carry the Buckstrap an' Peaberry line. None better; they wear like iron, stand all kinds of heat, an' the shine never leaves with the proper care." He paused, reached into the wagon behind him, and lifted out a two-gallon brown jug. "I take cash or I swap for this an' that."

McBride had started to say something, but the sight of the jug halted him. He stood there staring. A thin smile started streaking across his face as he watched Barker lift the jug and take a healthy drink. Licking his lips, he walked closer, suddenly friendly.

"Likely-lookin' critter," he declared, stroking the hog's back. "'Bout the best-lookin' hawg I've seen in many a day, Brother Barker. Good team yo've got, too. Whole layout looks fine."

He stared at the jug with longing eyes. Despairingly, he watched Barker put the cork back in place and return the jug to the back of the seat. Suddenly he threw up his right hand. "Don't do it, *Mister* Barker!" he implored wildly. "Sinner to sinner, I need a dram. I'm dyin' on my feet. My eyeballs ache."

"Whiskey costs money." There was no sympathy in Barker's tone. "Saloons don't give it away. Giddap, hosses!" He popped the rumps of the grays with his lines. "We gotta be gettin' along."

"Wait!" McBride jumped up on the double-trees in front of the hog. "Don't drive on an' leave a man standin' an' sufferin'. Man to man, Mr. Barker, I'm dyin'. I'll buy pots an' pans, I'll swap hosses with yuh, but I need a drink."

Barker kept right on driving. McBride kept arguing. They turned a short bend in the trail, passed around a pile of tall rocks. Then Barker suddenly brought the old wagon to a halt with a wild surge-back on the long lines.

"Brother"—he looked at McBride—"we'll both take a drink now."

"Yo're a gentleman!" McBride reached over and patted his knee. "A first-rate gentleman, Brother Barker. A—"

"But it ain't merely for yuh I'm doin' it." Barker's voice had become sad again. He was not looking at McBride. He was staring straight ahead. "It's what I see, an' this makes the second one I've run up on in the four days I've been in Thunder River Canyon."

"What is it?" McBride turned and looked. For the next minute neither man spoke. They simply stared, their mouths opened, each holding his breath. Ahead of them, swinging from the end of a rope thrown over a stout cottonwood limb high above the trail, hung the body of a man; a man with his long neck extended, and the agony of death still on his gray-bearded face.

"It looks"—McBride's voice was a grunt when it finally came—"like we've sort o' rid up on the tail end of somebody's hangin' bee, Brother Barker, but don't let it stop yore plumb good notion to uncork yore little brown jug."

CHAPTER II

GUNMEN ON THE RIM

THEIR yelling brought Weldon with the horses a few moments later. While he was coming they had a couple of drinks. When he arrived they had a third drink, and offered him the jug. He ignored it, giving his attention to the grotesque figure swinging on the end of the rope.

It was the body of a man well over sixty, a lean, half-ragged man with an old black hat still on the back of his head, one run-over boot half off and threatening to drop the rest of the way every time the breeze swayed the hanging figure slowly to the right and left.

"From the looks of it"—McBride was taking another drink—"it was plumb ruinatious on somebody. Utah, what do yuh make of it?"

It was almost a minute before Weldon saw the note pinned to the body. It was up there high on the chest, almost hidden by one of the lapels which the wind had flipped forward. Riding close to the body, Weldon stood in his stirrups reading the small white card, written in a bold, precise hand:

Here hangs the body of Silent Hank,
Knock-kneed, buck-toothed, lean and lank.
He went out fast and without a tear—
With his neck broke from ear to ear!
Ogurez,
THE MASK

Weldon read it again, his eyes narrowing as he studied each word. McBride left the jug long enough to mount his flea-bitten roan and ride up beside him and squint at the card. After a few moments he turned to Weldon with a puzzled scowl.

"Shore meant business, didn't they, Utah?"

"What does it say?" Jasper Barker had driven closer. "Read it aloud."

"Yuh go ahead, Utah." McBride scratched his head and then leaned closer to speak in a whisper: "This feller don't know I can't read handwritin', an' I ain't lettin' him know I'm short on schoolin'."

Weldon read the note aloud. McBride slid back in his saddle, scratching his head again and that same puzzled frown on his face.

"Sounds kind o' like poultry, don't it, Utah? An' the name signed to it sounds like Mex."

"It's an attempt at poetry, yes." Weldon nodded, still standing there, studying the note. "But the name means something else. That is, the 'Ogurez' part does. It's not a name at all or I miss my guess. Listen." He spelled it slowly, pronouncing each letter. "O. G. U. R. E. Z.—*Oh, gee, you are easy!* Maybe it's supposed to be funny. If it is, I don't see the joke. We'll go on to Rattlewood and report it to the sheriff."

He slipped back into his saddle. Jasper Barker slapped his horses. They moved on just a couple of yards, and the old wagon came to a groaning and rattling halt. Then Weldon saw why.

A ragged youth of about ten sat his lop-eared bay before them. He was a bucktoothed, freckle-faced boy with rusty-red hair, a mere button for a nose, and a pair of staring blue eyes. He pulled up his horse quickly, right hand reaching down to the scarred butt of an old .44 Colt in a ragged holster at his hip.

"What's happened to gran'pa?" The blue eyes were suddenly hard as they glanced from face to face. "What's been done to 'im?"

"We haven't done anything to him, sonny." Weldon moved his

horse a little closer to the boy. "If that body is the body of your grandfather, then it looks like he's been hanged."

"An' . . . an' yuh didn't do it!" The boy was staring straight into Weldon's eyes. "No," he shook his head before Weldon could speak, "I know yuh didn't do it. I learned lots about folks from gran'pa. He left the shack to go to town last night. Now . . . he's here." The thin voice cracked. "I . . . mighta knowed somethin' bad happened to keep 'im 'way all night an' the most of the day to boot. I'd started to ride to Rattleweed when . . . when I saw yuh folks from a knoll up the river. Who done this to my gran'pa, mister?"

"I don't know, sonny." Weldon swung his horse in beside the boy and placed his hand on the youngster's shoulder. "It looks like the body's been hanging there for hours. Somebody must have passed along during that time."

"The stage did pass nearly two hours ago," admitted the boy. "The Deadwater-Rattleweed up-country. I saw it from acrost the river while I was watchin' out for gran'pa. He . . . he never bothered nobody, mister. We . . . we live over there" —he pointed to the northwest—"in a shack built agin' the side of the canyon. Gran'pa's had a little gold claim over there. His name's Jim North. Mine's Jedd North. I ain't got no other folks. Gran'pa was the . . . the last."

He started to cry. Weldon slipped his arm closer around him. It was then that they heard the fierce clatter of hoofs beating down the canyon. In a few minutes six men had appeared on sweat-dripping horses. Weldon's eyes were coldly calculating as they galloped down the trail with clouds of dust raging up behind the heels of their blowing horses.

FROM the start it was apparent that the leader of the group was a lawman. He was a tall, square-knit man of thirty, mounted on a handsome chestnut sorrel and dressed entirely in black save for a big white hat on the back of his head. Weldon noticed even from the distance that the man was blond. His face was ruddy, his cheeks high and shining from a recent shave. Behind him the other riders were a conglomeration of sizes and shapes. Two of them were tall and lean-faced men of somewhere close to sixty. Another was short, pot-bellied, and dish-faced. The fifth might have been a one-eyed half-breed. He was almost as brown as a Mexican, a tall, square-shouldered fellow who rode the saddle of his bay as straight and stiffly as a ramrod. The sixth man could have been described as a runt. He was little and squint-eyed, with a perpetual grin on his homely face.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen!" The leader swung his horse to a halt, his gray eyes glancing from face to face, and then at the body swinging from the rope. "It looks as if you have come upon another quiet little murder. The up-country stage brought the news to me about an hour ago."

"We don't know nothin' 'bout it," McBride began. "Just rid up sort o' accidental, an' there hung the man like yuh see 'im. We—"

"You're not yet under any shadow of suspicion, my friend." The lawman came on. As if he did not have to even look for it, he stood up in his stirrups and removed the note from the dead man's chest. He looked at it, scowled, and passed it on to the two tall men. "The

same little joker." His smile was hard, grim. He glanced at Weldon, and then removed another small white card from his pocket. "We always find something like this on the bodies."

Weldon took the card. It was identical in shape to the one the sheriff had taken from the dead man's chest. The writing was in the same bold, precise hand. Weldon studied it and read:

Here lies the carcass of Sister Sue,
A calamity Jane to all she knew.
With a would-be detective last night,
She was caught whispering in the moonlight,
And now may her soul rest in hell
For all the tales she wanted to tell.
Ogurez,
THE MASK

"And who," Weldon wanted to know as he handed back the card, "is this 'Oh, gee, you're easy—The Mask?' "

"I see that you've figured it out." The lawman's eyes narrowed, and he glanced quickly at the two tall men.

"That's right." Weldon nodded. He introduced himself, McBride, and Jasper Barker. Then he told how the body had been found. The officer did not show any surprise whatever. "And you say that there are more hangings?" Weldon asked.

"And plain murders, yes." The man nodded. "My name's Leighton, Mr. Weldon. Gabriel Leighton, sheriff of Rattleweed. I don't know what you and your friends want up Rattleweed way, but I do know that you've come to a hell hole filled with mystery and murder. The note you've just read was taken from the body of a woman this morning, a woman found staked flat on her back on the ground with her throat cut. We—"

A noise halted him. It was something whistling through the air from the distant canyon rim to eastward. There was a sickening *smack!* The short, dish-faced man suddenly straightened in his saddle, left hand flying to his chest, his face instantly

sickly yellow from pain. Weldon saw the blood then. It was pouring through the man's fingers and spilling down his bosom.

"Walt's shot!" The sheriff's voice was a wild yell of sudden terror. "From the canyon rim, men! We can't—"

Another whistling bullet cut him off. It struck one of the canvas-covered bows of the old wagon just above Jasper Barker's head. Then a third bullet came, a fourth, a fifth, and a sixth.

Scatter!"

Leighton roared out the command in a frantic voice, but there was no need of it. Everybody was already scattering. Barker whipped up his old horses and the wagon started with a lurch, the pots and pans clattering, the hog squealing, and Barker yelling like an Indian gone suddenly wild on fire water.

"Back among the rocks—*quick!*"

Bullets were all around them now. The air was singing with them. They slapped the rocks and the trees, and then with everybody suddenly out of sight except Jasper Barker and his half-flying old wagon, the shooting came to a staggering end, leaving the canyon hushed in silence save for the wild clattering of the pots and pans going on toward Rattleweed as if the devil himself was after the tin peddler.

CHAPTER III

BOOGER'S KINSFOLK

THINGS shorely get done round here, don't they, Mr. Sheriff?" Booger Bill McBride spoke with a wry grin as he mopped huge balls of perspiration from his forehead with a red bandanna. "Faster'n a jackass a-kickin' his heels off in a tin stable!"

"Faster than lightning striking, yes," the sheriff agreed. "We're almost used to it by this time, stranger."

Weldon had pulled to a halt with Jedd North beside him. The man who had been shot had slipped and dropped out of his saddle, and was now lying there moaning on the ground. Up the trail two hundred yards away, Jasper Barker had stopped his wagon, bringing it to a halt behind a tall cluster of rocks that would shield him and his team from the dangerous rifles of the murderous marksmen on the canyon rim.

To Weldon's growing surprise, it looked as if Sheriff Gabriel Leighton was not going to do anything about the wild burst of shooting that had come raging down upon them so suddenly. When a minute had gone by and nothing had been done, Weldon remarked about it.

"As useless, my friend," the sheriff looked at him with cold, searching eyes, "as trying to fight back at the tail of an Oklahoma cyclone. We'll go up on the rim, of course, but we won't find anything. Nothing except a place where two or three men have been lying, and some empty cartridge shells scattered about. You can have your friend bring back the wagon. We'll load Walt Overton and the body of old man North into it, and then the rest can get along toward Rattleweed and the undertaker's office while I take West Brooks and Sam Yates"—he nodded to the tall, elderly men—"and scout the rim."

"Me an' my pard'll go with yuh dudes, if yuh don't mind." McBride spoke across his shoulder as he turned away to ride on and bring back the wagon. "I'd sort o' like to see the spot where the shootin' took place, 'cause I don't like to get shot at an' not know who's shootin' at me or why."

"The best thing you and your pardner can do is to keep out of it." The sheriff's eyes narrowed as he spoke. "Not that I don't appreciate help." He looked at Weldon. "I do—when I know the men who want to help me. But taking sides with the law is dangerous business in Thunder River Canyon, Mr. Weldon. I've lost five deputies in the past thirty days. Good men, too. But the Mask is revengeful. He kills."

"And who the devil is the Mask?" Weldon swung his horse closer to Leighton's. "You talk about him as if he's some kind of a killer ghost roving your range."

"He's worse than any ghost." The sheriff's voice was suddenly bitter as he looked up, his gray eyes searching the canyon rim. "Ghosts don't kill you, or murder women. That card

I showed you was no joke, Mr. Weldon. Sister Sue was Dr. Doom's housekeeper in Rattleweed, an elderly woman who was a friend of old Jim North. Jim must have somehow been about to receive a little help from Sister Sue, though neither the doctor nor myself nor my men can imagine what help Sue could have given him. It must have been damned important, but today old Jim's dead, and so is Sister Sue." Bitterness crept into his voice. "Murders like this go on here week after week, sometimes three or four in one week. Good men and bad alike die when the Mask strikes. Nobody knows the Mask; nobody still alive has seen him. It's so damned bad I see heads leering at me when I try to sleep. I see the nooses dangling, empty, staring eyes, the faces contorted in agony, mouths slacked open—death leering at me." He smiled wearily and looked at Weldon's face. "If you and your friend haven't something mighty important to do in Rattleweed, I'd suggest that you keep moving, and when you pitch camps at night you'd better sleep with one eye open until this accursed place is far behind you."

The silence that fell was pregnant with drama. Weldon did not know whether to believe this Gabe Leighton or not. In one breath the man seemed to be talking for the mere sake of talking and trying to put the fear of damnation in a man. The next moment he was as grim as an archangel.

Only one thing was certain about the sheriff, and it came to Weldon as he kept talking to the man. Gabriel Leighton was not a trusting man. That he trusted West Brooks and Sam Yates was almost a certainty, but it was doubtful about the others. The man did not look like a crook, and yet there were those ever-narrowing eyes, the occasional hard set to the mouth, and the words that sometimes carried the sharpness of a razor when they fell from his lips.

WHEN the wagon was brought back and the dead man and the wounded deputy loaded into it, Jedd North had ceased crying. Weldon studied the boy from the corners of his eyes. There was something grim and determined in the youngster's face. He kept close to Weldon as if he instinctively knew he had found a friend and had no intention of losing him.

By this time it looked as if the reign of quiet on the canyon rim would continue, but even as the old wagon turned back up the trail there was the crash of a powerful rifle on the rim, and suddenly the cottonwoods and rocks were again whistling with bullets.

"Get out an' go yonder!" Barker was whipping up his horses. "Step an' fetch it, yuh sons of guns!"

The hog squealed as the rattling, swaying old wagon plunged away behind the frightened horses. Barker was again heading back for the safety of the tall rocks, but there was no safety anywhere now. A long-range firing was breaking out along the western rim of the canyon, the bullets half spent as they fell among the trees.

"We've got to get out o' here, Utah!" McBride swung in beside Weldon. "Dammit, do we just set an' gape like a couple of sick roosters or do we fight." He lifted his long old rifle from under his battered slicker on the left side of his saddle. "I'm damned if I like bein' shot at."

But everybody was scattering. The sheriff was suddenly galloping

down the trail with West Brooks and Sam Yates behind him. Weldon and McBride followed them, keeping Jedd North between them on his old horse.

It was when they came to the trail in the ledges of the eastern wall of the canyon that Gabriel Leighton suddenly turned on Weldon and McBride. The man was white-faced with anger and his eyes glittered dangerously.

"I told you men I didn't need your help!" His tone carried the metallic snap of a closing steel trap. "I meant that! Go on to Rattleweed, or go anywhere you want! I don't give a damn for anything except to see that you strangers don't trail with me."

"What are we supposed to do?" Weldon's voice was hard and flat. "Sit back there and get shot?"

"And there's that boy with you." It looked as if the sheriff was about to reach for the butt of one of his guns. "This is no place for him!"

"An' what's to be done 'bout 'im?" McBride was losing his temper, too. "Do we cut his throat or shoot 'im in the belly? He had to run some way. Comin' this way looked safer than tryin' to shove 'im on with the wagon an' the rest of yore bunch. Yuh sure ain't trustin' us, Leighton. An' that means only one of two things: Yo're either on the square an' afraid to trust a couple of slick gun han's because yuh can't tell which way a frog'll jump by just lookin' at 'im, or yo're a hawg-eyed crook an' afraid we'll find yuh out an' maybe spile some plan of yores an' yore friends. Easy, now, feller!" His voice lifted jarringly as the sheriff's right hand swept to the butt of a Colt. "Don't pull it, Mr. Sheriff. Twix me an' Utah, yuh ain't got the chance of a snowball in hell when it comes to gun throwin'. If yuh was on the square an' we happened to be a pair of crooked han's, we'd just blast yuh outta the picture right now an' have it all done with."

GABRIEL LEIGHTON sat there staring, right hand still gripping the butt of his Colt. The sporadic shooting up the canyon was still going on from the west. It had come to an end up there on the eastern rim, and the old wagon was going on, the clouds of dust hiding it in the distance. No bullets were striking here near the old ledge trail, and save for the sounds of the distant firing it seemed oddly quiet.

But Leighton was not thinking of the wagon. He was not even thinking of the shooting. He was staring straight into the black muzzles of a pair of six-shooters that had come into McBride's hand as if some sudden flash of magic had planted them there from nowhere.

" 'Tain't in us to pick a row," McBride was going on, covering Brooks and Yates with his guns at the same time. "We heard there was a war of some kind over here. I'll tell it to yuh straight. I've got a cousin livin' somewhere close to Rattleweed. I got Utah to come along with me. He didn't much wanta do it, but he wouldn't turn me down. Sez I, 'Utah, my cousin Jawn's up there an' sort o' in a jackpot of trouble. He ain't let me know, but I got wind of it. We McBrides an' the Martins stick together. I—"

"Are you talking about John Martin?" Leighton suddenly felt his hand slipping away from the butt of his six-shooter. "Then you're *the* Booger Bill McBride!"

"I ain't *the* nothin'," McBride said tartly. "People with no raisin'

to speak of sometimes call me Booger. But yuh asked 'bout Jawn. Shore, I'm talkin' 'bout Jawn Martin. Talkin' 'bout him, an' Liz, which is his wife. Then there's Jawn's son, Tobe, an' his two gals. The older one's name is Mary. The other'n's called Zell. I—"

"Well, I'll be damned!" With a jump, Leighton put his horse up beside McBride. His right hand thrust forward. "Shake, Booger Bill! I've heard a lot about you. Why, you're the very man I've been looking for!"

"It's a warrant, I reckon?" McBride's face was suddenly sad and sour. "Well, go ahead an' serve it."

"But it's not a warrant, you old wild cat!" McBride had holstered his guns and Leighton was pumping his hand up and down. "I sure need you, Booger. Did you know I married Mary Martin two years ago?"

"Kinsfolk, huh?" McBride took off his old hat and started scratching his head violently. "Well, what do yuh think o' that."

CHAPTER IV

DEATH ON THE RIM

THE ice was broken. From a man who seemed suspicious of his own shadow, Weldon saw Gabriel Leighton change to a suddenly relieved individual teeming with confidence and almost bombastic friendliness. He shook hands with Weldon twice. He slapped Booger Bill McBride on the back as if he had just discovered that McBride was a long-lost friend.

"Cussedness on two feet!" he told McBride. "That's what all the Martins say when your name's brought up, Booger! Cussedness in one breath, the devil's half brother, grandfather to damnation, and a first-class fighting man in anybody's quarrel!"

"Only yuh can't allus believe the Martins." McBride grinned, pulled on his old hat and scratched his ear. "They ain't allus to be trusted, Gabe. They'll talk one way to yuh, an' one way to me. The last time I visited 'em Liz hit me over the head with a fryin' pan one mornin' at the breakfast table just 'cause I said the coffee tasted like dish water an' then added some quiet remark 'bout the Martins never bein' able to marry a woman what could cook. I expect a row with 'em when we ride into Rattleweed."

They rode on up the steep trail. As they rode, the expressions on the faces of Sam Yates and West Brooks changed. They became friendly. Yates dropped back to ride beside Weldon and Jedd North while McBride and Leighton kept in the lead. Brooks swung away to the right like an Indian scout in a hostile country when they reached the canyon rim. In this fashion they kept on, their hands tight on their reins, their eyes watchful.

"But we ain't findin' nothin' when we get there," Yates told Weldon gloomily. "Nothin' but empty shells, as Gabe said. All this is just a scare-up. I think this is just the mean way the Mask has of showin' his contempt for the law an' all the folks in the canyon who try to support it."

"You think the Mask is alone in this thing, Mr. Yates?" Weldon glanced at him out of the corners of his eyes.

"Just call me Sam." Yates frowned. "All my friends do that. Them that ain't my friends don't. But"—he shook back his shoulders —"I'll answer yore question, Utah. The Mask ain't alone in this thing. He's got plenty of he'p. Hanged if

I don't think he's had it from time to time in our office. Yes, sir, men workin' as if they was all for Gabe, an' at the same time they was there only to saw a knife across his throat. That's why he was so skittish of yuh two dudes. He wants to be friendly with anybody an' ever'body what's half on the level, but he's been fooled too many times of late."

They were soon coming to the place where the firing had first begun. Every man was watchful, and yet there was something about them that showed Weldon that they did not expect trouble. When they reached the place it was exactly as Leighton had said. Here, right on the rim behind rocks and bushes, was the place where four gunmen had been lying on their stomachs with rifles pushed through cracks in the rocks in front of them. Many empty cartridge shells lay on the ground, and fifty feet away from the rim were tracks in a sandy spot where horses had stood.

"There's still a horse on the other side of the canyon!" Jedd North lifted his voice into almost a thin shout. "See it over there? A pinto standin' back in them low pines just north of them tallest rocks?"

"Wait a minute."

Sheriff Leighton was suddenly removing an old telescope from one of the hair-covered pockets on his saddle. He lifted it and adjusted it as he leaned forward to rest his forearm on his horse's mane. In a few moments he sat up with a start, and there was tense excitement in his voice when he spoke:

"There's a man over there yet. I can see the top of his head and shoulders! He looks like he's lying on his stomach right there in a crack in the rocks and about two yards back from the rim. West"—he turned quickly to Brooks—"you'd better stay here and keep this telescope." He thrust the old instrument into the man's hand. "That's only a joker over there. You get yourself settled there against those rocks. Get that thing steadied. Watch that fellow on the other side. When we start over there, he's going to get up and make a run for it. You'll peg who he is then."

"I think I already know the hoss, Gabe," Brooks declared as he slid out of his saddle with the old telescope in his hands. "I think—"

"You couldn't know the horse!" The sheriff was anxious to be moving. "Hell, there are at least forty big black-and-white horses like that in the canyon. Stay here and watch. When that fellow over there jumps up to make his getaway, that will be our one chance of getting a definite line on somebody in this thing. Come on, the rest of you."

THEY swung their horses away and galloped back down the rim. Weldon wanted to say something. He did not like the idea of leaving Brooks alone there on the rim, but Leighton was too impatient and excited to talk to anyone. He pushed his horse unmercifully across the canyon. There they found a mere wild goat trail. With the horses dripping sweat and blowing as if their lungs would burst, they came to the canyon rim, and turned up it among the rocks and low jackpines.

"Look out now, Leighton!" Weldon uttered the warning before they had gone more than ninety yards. "That horse is still there. This is some trick they're playing on us. That horse and man were deliberately left there for some purpose."

"It's what I've been thinkin', Utah." McBride was slowing his horse to an easy canter and thrusting his holsters forward on their old belts. "They're only playin' with us like bumblebees naggin' at a pup's tail."

Weldon glanced back across the canyon. He could catch a glimpse of Brooks lying over there in the rocks. A strange feeling came over Weldon, making him sense that something was about to happen to Brooks. He watched the man for a moment, and then looked back up the rim where the pinto was standing in the low pines. Thirty seconds later they were riding up on the figure of a dead man lying in tht rocks with the ten-inch blade of an old-fashioned Bowie buried to the hilt between his shoulder blades.

They dismounted slowly. At first there had been an excited uprush of mumbling and cursing. Now it was quiet. Sheriff Leighton moved forward like as if he expected gunfire to suddenly lurch toward him from behind every rock and tree. Instinctively, his hands were on the butts of his guns, his eyes searching the rim of the canyon. He walked to the dead man slowly and halted. For a few seconds he stood there looking down at the long, limp figure of a man somewhere in the neighborhood of sixty years old. As if he knew exactly where to look for it, he rolled the body over. Pinned on the blood-stained chest was another one of those white cards with handwriting upon it.

Weldon watched quietly as Leighton removed the note. He watched the blood drain out of the lawman's face as he read the precise handwriting. Slowly, as if he had all day for this thing, the sheriff turned and handed the note to Weldon. Weldon took it. For the benefit of old Booger Bill, he read it aloud:

Here lies the body of Old Joe Stoutt,
Deader than hell with the lights shot out.
Ogurez,
THE MASK

"Damn!" McBride took off his hat and scratched his head briskly. "The Mask fella gets worse an' worse, don't he, Gabe!"

Brooks had been forgotten for the moment. It was not for long. The distant crash of a rifle rolled across the canyon like a dying echo. Everybody suddenly looked in that direction. They saw Brooks stagger to his feet. There was a metallic flash in the dying sunlight as the old telescope dropped from the hands of the man across the canyon. They saw the metallic flash bounce, saw it fly out into space and start spinning down the long drop to the canyon floor.

"They got West!" Sam Yates gasped. "They bored him from behind!"

Brooks was still standing over there, both hands gripped to his chest, his hat having fallen off, his face uplifted to the sky. For almost five seconds he stood there, a figure so tense he looked like something made of iron and deep-rooted to the rocks. As if a wind came along to give him a slight push, he started forward, a rigid, wooden thing leaning out over the rim. Then he was falling, all the rigidity suddenly leaving him, his arms and legs flapping loosely, the body spinning down, striking an outhanging ledge, bouncing high in the air, and going on and on to the jagged rocks far below the rim.

"And that settles it!" Sheriff Gabriel Leighton's voice was low and despairing. "I'm riding back to Rattleweed and handing in my star. I'm licked. I know when I'm licked!

I'm only getting men killed every time I turn around. I'm not worth my salt as a lawman!"

CHAPTER V

RATTLEWEED RATTLES

DARKNESS had settled long before they were within sight of Rattleweed with their two dead men lashed across the saddles of horses behind them. They had gone back to the eastern rim of the canyon, but they had found no sign of where the gunman had hidden to kill West Brooks. The killer had evidently been back there somewhere in the rocks. He had downed his man and had disappeared, the dirty work done, and the killer making fast headway either back to Rattleweed or to some hide-out in the hills.

Leaving the canyon rim, they had picked up the hopelessly shattered body of Brooks, and had ridden by Jim North's little shack, a mere hovel couched under the cliffs west of the river. In a glance Weldon had seen that Jim North and his grandson must have been almost poverty-stricken. There was a little pouch of gold in the cabin. By the weight of it as he handed it to the boy, Weldon guessed that it was worth less than thirty dollars. The killers must have known that it was there, and that meant that no form of robbery was connected with all these murders taking place in the canyon.

"Nobody's ever robbed," the sheriff explained. "Robbery has nothing to do with this thing, Utah. It's the same from one end of the canyon to the other. In Lawful, eighty miles north of Rattleweed, it's the same. It's the same forty miles below us in Jumpoff, down there where the canyon walls bend together until the canyon's no more than thirty feet wide. Jumpoff is where the river takes a six-hundred-foot plunge down the face of an almost sheer cliff."

"Did it ever occur to you," Weldon ventured, "that Jumpoff might be the answer to your riddle, Gabe? That it might be somebody's bright idea to take over the entire canyon—"

"And develop a power project, yes." The sheriff nodded. "We've thought of that. The expense of such a thing would be very little.

A few tons of explosives placed in the high walls and cliffs down there would do the trick. Hundreds of miles of water would back up in these mountains. You could even

operate steamboats on the lake it would make. It would wipe out the finest cattle and sheep lands in all this country, but some say it would be a boom to the region. More towns, even cities, would spring up along the rim of the lake. But the people in Thunder River Canyon don't want that. They want homes, a place to live out their days in peace. There's no peace for a man in any damned city, Utah."

"Spoken like a real Westerner!" Weldon agreed with a laugh.

They were in sight of Rattleweed now. It was a typical cow town, and like the most of them it hugged the river as closely as possible. High walls of rock spanned by an old wooden wagon bridge gave it its foothold. The main part of the town was on the west side of the stream, and the houses on the east side were mostly mere huts and

The note read:
Here hangs the body of Silent Hank,
Knock-kneed, buck-toothed, lean and lank.
He went out fast and without a tear—
With his neck broke from ear to ear!

hovels. As if crowded for room in a country where there was so much open space, the streets were narrow and twisting. Lamps burned everywhere like weary eyes. From the doorways of saloons the light flared outward, showing mobs of people crowded along the hard-packed earthen sidewalks.

"Heap bigger'n it was when I was here ten years ago." McBride was rolling a cigarette as their horses struck the bridge with their hoofs making a sound like the slow beat of funeral drums. "I remember I had to swim the river a couple of miles below here, Gabe."

"I remember talk of that, too, Booger." Leighton grinned at him in the darkness. "The Martins told me about it."

"It . . . it was 'fore the bridge was built," McBride asserted. "I remember they was just gettin' started on the buildin' of the shee-bang."

"The bridge has been here thirty years." The sheriff was still grinning. "If reports are true, Booger, you had to swim because there was a sheriff and two deputies waiting on the bridge for you."

"I'd druther," McBride frowned, "not hear any more 'bout that. As I said, yuh never can believe what them damn Martins tell yuh."

THEY saw Jasper Barker a few minutes later. His old wagon was standing in a vacant weed-grown lot to their left. He had just unloaded his dead. His horses were unhitched, the harness stripped from them, and they were busy at a feed box at the rear end of the wagon, while Barker squatted over a little campfire with his pet hog beside him. McBride licked his lips, and started toward the wagon. But Weldon caught the roan by the cheek strap of the bridle, and kept McBride heading on up the street.

"You're staying sober, you damned old battle-ax!" Weldon's patience was losing ground rapidly. "You'll be sober tonight if I have to bat you over the head with a gun barrel and knock you cold."

With McBride scowling and still stealing glances at Barker's wagon, they swung to the right and pulled up among saddled horses and a ragged array of old buckboards at a hitch rack in front of a dingy, unpainted building. People swarmed around them as they dismounted, and excitement seemed to be running at its peak.

"Somethin's got to be done!" A big, black-bearded man pressed through the crowd with his fists clenched and his face bloodless with anger as the dead men were being taken from the horses. "Yo've got to do somethin', Gabe. This thing just can't go on, damn it!"

"Something's going to be done." Leighton clamped his hand on the man's shoulder and looked at him grimly. "I'm handing in my badge and admitting that I'm not man enough to handle this job."

"Yuh ain't doin' nothin' of the kind!" The black-bearded man's voice lifted into the roar of some wild animal in a trap. "There ain't nobody to take yore place. We put yuh in the job. Yuh didn't want the job, I'll admit, but yuh done well until this thing popped. We expect yuh to stick to it. We—uh-hh—" His voice came to a choking, gasping halt, his eyes widening, mouth slacking open as he saw Booger Bill McBride ease forward into the lamplight. He caught his breath a couple of times, and then his voice came in a louder roar. "Leapin' lizards, am I seein' ha'nts!"

"Yuh ain't seein' no ha'nts onless

it's yore own shadow, Jawn," McBride assured him complacently. "Yo're lookin' at a man what yuh owe exactly eighty-four dollars an' ninety cents to. That's for pay for ridin' herd on yore cows an' shootin' a few rustlers for yuh ten years ago. I didn't have time to collect my wages when yuh helped run me outta town on account o' a little cuttin' up and settin' the calaboose afire. Jawn Martin, yo're lookin' at Mr. William Lazarus Alonzo McBride."

"Well, I'll be damned!" John Martin stepped back, eyes staring. "It gets worse every second. First it's murder from hell to the breakfast table, an' then it's Booger Bill McBride! Shake!" He thrust forward his hand. "I ain't particular these days."

"Well, I am." McBride backed away from the hand. "Put that ham in yore pocket, Jawn. I had a bath in a crick a week ago, an' I ain't wantin' to get dirty. How's Liz?"

"*Elizabeth's* all right." Martin stepped back. "She's always all right when polecats like yuh ain't round to bother her."

Weldon left them standing there bantering away at each other. With Jedd North at his heels, he helped Gabriel Leighton and two more men carry the bullet-stabbed and bone-shattered body of West Brooks on inside the store. They passed a wide-eyed clerk standing behind a dingy, lop-sided counter and stumbled on into a back room that looked like a combined undertaker's establishment and a doctor's office.

A tall, gray-haired skeleton of a man in shiny black with a Vandyke beard arose from behind a desk as they stretched Brooks' body on a table beside that of Jim North. Weldon had never seen a man whose face was so pale and whose dark eyes were so staring. Leighton introduced him as Dr. Doom, and when the man thrust out his hand, Weldon had the feeling that he was gripping the cold tail of a dead fish.

"Glad to know you, sir." The doctor bowed like an old-fashioned dancing master. "A newcomer, I suppose, and a friend of our good sheriff of Rattleweed?"

"Both." Somehow Weldon had a feeling of relief when he released the man's long claw of a hand. "Business seems to be rushing with you, doctor." He nodded toward the two dead men on the table as the body of old Joe Stoutt was brought in. "Terrible, isn't it?"

"There isn't a word ghastly enough to describe it, Mr. Weldon." The doctor stepped back, rubbing his hands. "I came here three years ago for my health. My nerves and lungs." He pressed one claw of a hand to his chest. "At first it was the most beautiful and healthy place a man could possibly hope to find. Of late it is the funeral parlor of the devil." He bowed and smiled, his huge, dark teeth glinting in the lamplight and making him look more like a skeleton than ever. "I hope you find your stay in the canyon a pleasant one in spite of all our ill fortune of late, Mr. Weldon."

"Thank you, doctor."

Weldon was glad to get out of the place when he walked back to the front door with Leighton. There was something about the doctor's office that seemed to poison the very air of the room. Not alone was the reek of death in the air, there was something else, a sickly odor that reminded one of a pesthouse filled with leprous patients.

"What do you think of Dr. C. Doom?" Leighton whispered the

question in Weldon's ear as they stepped out on the earthen sidewalk with Jedd North still at their heels.

"Don't know yet." Weldon spoke from the side of his mouth. "His place maybe has something to do with it, but I can say now that I'd hate to have to sleep in the same room with him or anything like him. Got any suspicions?"

"Not about him." The sheriff laughed softly. "Nobody actually likes him. I think it's because of his unhealthy appearance. He's a good doctor, though, accommodating, willing to brace a blizzard and ride forty miles to save the life of any worthless Mexican sheepherder. He—"

Leighton paused abruptly, his speech ripped away from him by the fierce thunder of a .45 shot in a saloon called the Rafter Bar across the street. A wild roar of yells came from the saloon. Suddenly the swinging front doors of the Rafter Bar were flying open. A crowd came pouring out on the street just as the .45 thundered twice again like a loudly barking dog with a voice half muffled by shattering bottles and splintering glassware.

Weldon saw Booger Bill McBride a moment later. Jasper Barker was on one side of him. John Martin was on the other. They were bodily dragging McBride backward out of the saloon, and in the latter's hands were his old .45s. McBride's voice came in the noisy rush. It was like the wail of a fighting wild cat.

"He had no cockeyed business to get mad in such a hurry! All I said was that his whiskey tasted as mean as his looks, an' the damn fool got huffy as hell an' reached for his bung starter on the back bar. An' all I did was just to shoot it out of his hand!"

CHAPTER VI

THE FIRST KILL

McBRIDE was still raging like a wild cat as Weldon, Leighton, and Jedd North hurried across the street, but before Weldon reached him, McBride broke away from Barker and Martin. Like a grizzly shaking himself free of a couple of traps, he flung Barker in one direction and Martin in the other. Free of his entanglements, he started right back into the saloon where an enormously fat and white-faced bartender was hiding in cringing terror behind a whiskey barrel.

Utah Dave Weldon did the only thing a man could do when old Booger Bill McBride got mad and started in to literally take a town by the ears and kick it apart. He moved in quickly and caught McBride by the shoulder. With one swift, powerful blow, he sent his right fist crashing against the man's jaw.

It was like felling an ox with a maul. Consciousness left McBride as if a stick of dynamite had exploded against his jaw. His feet slithered from under him. Weldon held on to him to break his fall, and eased him down to the floor. It was then that another wild cat took shape behind Weldon, throwing himself on him.

Now John Martin was into it. Weldon arose with a surge, throwing Martin off before Gabriel Leighton could take a hand in it. Then a third figure was taking chips in the scuffle. It was Jasper Barker. He stepped up behind Martin with his long, sad face as emotionless as a granite wall. His old .45 had come out of his holster. He swung it back, and Leighton was there just in time to seize the man's wrist and keep him from smashing his old

weapon down across John Martin's head and dropping him with a blow that might have cracked his skull.

"Enough of this!" Leighton threw Martin and Barker to one side. "That's McBride's best friend, Mr. Martin. He knows how to handle Booger."

"So you're his friend, huh?" Martin stepped back, scowling. "I didn't know that, mister, but it don't yet speak a lot for yuh, knowin' Booger as I know 'im. I was fightin' for 'im just from a force of habit, I reckon. An' yuh started to whang me, did yuh?" He glowered at Barker. "Started to warp me with a gun?"

"I did, yuh bet I did." Jasper Barker had holstered his Colt, but there were wicked little lights in his eyes. "I'm a sort o' friend of Utah an' Booger, an' I'm a duck what fights for a friend."

"But . . . but, damn it, Jasper, I'm Booger's cousin!" It looked for a moment as if Martin was about to go for his guns. "We're kinsfolk!"

"Which ain't sayin' much for yuh or yore family," snorted Barker, "though I reckon yuh can't he'p it."

"Cut it out, both of you!" Leighton stepped angrily between them with his hands clenched into fists. "You're all friends. Stay that way in this man's town if you can! No harm has been done."

"Yes, there is!" McBride was stumbling to his feet in a daze, not yet fully aware of what had happened. "I was hit with a bung starter from behind! He . . . he slipped up behind me. I felt it just as plain! Where . . . where's my guns, Utah?"

"I've got them, Booger," Weldon told him. "I hit you, too." He caught him by the shoulder, shaking him violently. "Now come along. We'll stable and feed our horses, and then let's all go get something to eat. Come on, Barker, and join us. That goes for you and Gabe, Mr. Martin. The feed bill will be on me."

"Now yo're talkin', Utah." Barker grinned broadly. "I br'iled a piece of beefsteak a little while ago, but I could go another feedin' if somebody'll pay for it. But in speakin' of vittles"—he sidled up to Martin—"maybe I could sort o' hunker up to yore wife an' sell her some pots an' pans. I carry a mighty fine line—"

"Oh, damn yore pans!" Booger McBride said wearily. "Go get Snorky an' fetch 'im along, otherwise a Martin'll have 'im 'fore daylight."

IT ain't the first time I've et with a hawg," John Martin declared as they all walked into the Mother's Home Cooking Café on the north side of the street and found a fat Chinaman sitting behind the counter. Not until Barker had returned with his pet had Martin known that Snorky was a hog. "I've et with Booger several times in the past."

But it was a good meal for hungry men, especially for two who had not tasted food since before daylight. The thick steaks were tender, the coffee excellent, and the Chinaman good-natured. He tolled Snorky out the back door with a pail of rich slop that would have been a delight to any pet hog's eyes.

Sam Yates had disappeared almost the minute they had ridden into Rattleweed. His name was not even mentioned during the meal, and they saw no more of the old deputy sheriff until after they left the restaurant.

Barker and his Snorky, both well fed and contented, went back to their wagon. McBride grumbled

and swore that he would die before morning if he was not allowed just a couple of drinks, but he followed the others down a side street to the stone-walled old jail on the rim of

a sheer cliff a hundred feet above the rushing waters of the river.

"Jedd'll go home with me." John Martin was saying that when Leighton struck a match to light the way and was pushing open the door of the dark office of the jail. "My Elizabeth'll take care of 'im. I'd sort o' like havin' yuh round the ranch, Jedd," he told the boy. "It's only two miles straight up the river, an' yuh can ride back an' forth to school this fall. I—"

He halted abruptly as Gabriel Leighton stepped back against him with a gasp of surprise. The sheriff had stepped on into the office, the burning match lifted between his fingers, its flickering flare of light brightening the dark room. Now he suddenly stepped back like a man who had been slapped a brutal blow across the face. The match flickered out.

"What is it, Gabe?" There was quick alarm in John Martin's tone. "Are . . . are yuh sick, son?"

"Wait a minute!" Leighton caught Weldon by the arm as the latter started to press by him. "Not —just yet. Give me a second, Utah, to catch my breath."

"But . . . but what the devil is it?" McBride's voice was explosive. "Yuh ain't seein' a ha'nt, are yuh, Gabe?"

"It's worse than that!" Leighton's voice was hoarse, the voice of a man who had suddenly been shaken to the very bottom of his soul. "Sam Yates is in there. He's —dead. He's lying across the desk with his throat cut, and the blood has run all over the floor."

WELDON pushed on into the office in spite of the sheriff. He struck a match and lit an old kerosene lamp on the rusty iron safe sitting in the corner. Leighton had not exaggerated when he spoke of the blood. Spider-legged streams of it still dripped from the desk. The body of the deputy was as limp as a rag, and when Weldon took the lamp and moved closer, he saw blood oozing from a deep wound in the back of Yates' head that looked as if it had been made by the blow of some heavy, blunt instrument that had torn a deep, ragged hole in the scalp and had crushed the skull as if it had been an eggshell.

"Knocked down from behind when he came into the office." That was Weldon's grim comment a few minutes later as he stepped back after his brief examination of the body. "Look over there near the door. There's an unstruck match, one that Yates probably had in his

hand to strike just as he pushed open the door and stepped into the room. Somebody was laying for him. Somebody watched every move he made from the time he left us and stabled his horse to come on to the jail alone. Maybe somebody came here with him—somebody he thought was a friend. It's mighty dirty work they're handing you, Gabe. I don't blame you for feeling as if the bottom had dropped out of everything.

Leighton had come on inside and was slumped in a chair, a helpless, white-faced figure staring at the floor. Jedd North had backed against the wall, his lips trembling with fear. John Martin was speechless with awe, and for the moment old Booger Bill McBride was keeping his mouth shut and just staring at the body sprawled across the desk with that ugly gash in the throat running from ear to ear and the blood-oozing dent in the back of his head. In a few moments McBride found his voice. He spoke in a low, jarring tone.

"An' from the looks of things, Yates didn't even know his throat was bein' cut. The poor dude was out cold from that lick on the back of his head. Whoever messed 'im up done it fast an' with no time to waste. Got anybody back there in yore one-hoss jail, Leighton?"

"Nobody, Booger." Sheriff Leighton's voice was a groan. "Now and then there's a drunken sheepherder or a cowboy locked up for the night, but there's been no lock-ups for almost a week."

"Buck up, Gabe!" Weldon crossed the room and clamped his hand firmly on the sheriff's shoulder. "Don't let it get you down. Things are hitting too damned fast around here for them to last long."

West Brooks and Sam Yates were two of my best friends." Leighton's voice had become steady and his face a mask that might have been made of iron. "They've paid for their loyalty with their lives, and here I was"—suddenly he was on his feet, his eyes blazing with emotion—"talking about handing in my badge. I'm no damned quitter!" He glowered first at Weldon, then at McBride, and then at John Martin. "No, by damn!" It looked like he was about to spring at Martin's throat. "I'm not! I'll die with this damned thing on my vest!" He slapped his chest a ringing cuff. "They've got to get me before I'm done with this hell-fired job! Utah, will you and Booger Bill replace Sam and West?" He stepped forward eagerly, eyes shining. "They're badges smeared with blood that I offer you both, but it's good old fighting blood. If you're half the men Sam and West were, you'll never be ashamed that you wore them even if you die with your boots on as Sam and West died."

"I'll carry mine in my pocket, Gabe." McBride stepped forward. "I ain't never wore a badge pinned to my chest, an' I don't wanta break my record. An', anyhow—"

HE halted suddenly, eyes widening. A noise had filled the jail. It was a wild, weird outburst of sound that came up the corridor between the old cells and seemed to spring like a fierce blast through the latticed bars of the paint-scabbed steel of the first door leading into the jail.

It was laughter, shrill, terrible, a wild braying that sounded like the whistling of an eerie wind. For an instant it froze every man in his tracks, and then Weldon was whirling away. Like something made of rubber, he seemed to bounce to the

open doorway with Booger Bill McBride unholstering his guns and following right at his heels.

Once outside, Weldon swung to the right. McBride took the left. They hurried around the jail and came to the rear wall of it. Weldon heard something in the darkness to his left. It was a voice that swore thickly, and then came the crashing sounds of splintering wood as if somebody had run into an old packing box and had been thrown sprawling.

"Halt!" Weldon roared out the command. "Stand where you are or I'll kill you!"

A burst of laughter and a wild shot slapped back at him from the darkness. He opened fire at the vague outline of a running figure just disappearing in the mouth of a narrow passageway between two old square-fronted stores.

"After him!" Weldon yelled that to McBride. "We can't let him get away, Booger. He may be the man who killed Sam."

He himself easily outran Booger Bill. He came to the mouth of the passageway, and saw something bobbing along in a crazed flight in the darkness ahead of him. He was about to yell out another command when the form ahead of him was suddenly lighted by a flame of fire and the passageway seemed to swell and vibrate with the roaring of a heavy Colt. A split second later Weldon's six-shooters were thundering, and he had killed his first man in Rattleweed.

CHAPTER VII

ROPE TALK

BATTLEWEED was again roaring with excitement. Somebody brought a lantern. Down at the end of the long passageway lay the figure of a short, stocky man of about fifty-five. It was the body of a man well-dressed in oxford gray. His boots were shined, his beard and hair neatly trimmed. He looked to Weldon like some well-to-do business man. An incongruous note was the still warm Colt cradled in his hand. As Leighton took the lantern and held the light closer, Weldon saw that the toe of one of the boots was scuffed, and there was a small tear in one knee of the trousers.

"He got that when he ran over a wooden box and fell." Weldon spoke quietly, conscious of the steadily rising growls behind them. "I made no mistake, Gabe. He was the man who let out that hellish laugh through the grating in the back door. He had something to do with the murder of Sam."

"How do you know you made no mistake?" A tall, powerful man with red mustaches who looked like a wealthy cattleman had pushed through the crowd in the alleyway. "Dammit, do you know that you've killed Alec Spearman, the postmaster of Rattleweed?"

"Calm down a bit, mister, 'fore yuh choke on yore own words." Booger Bill McBride was bellying up to the man with a wicked light in his eyes. "Utah made no mistake. If this duck's such a big feller in yore town, how do yuh account for that gun in his hand?"

"It could have been placed there!" the tall man said angrily. "Even you, perhaps— Oh!"

A flash of lightning could not have done it any quicker. A six-shooter had leaped into Booger Bill McBride's right hand. With a fierce sweep he brought it up and down. The barrel and cylinder of the weapon caught the tall man flat and hard across the face, and without another sound he was down,

sprawled backward at the feet of the mob in the passageway.

"When a man says that about me," McBride had unholstered his second six-shooter, "I knock his damned teeth out. An' yore teeth's out, mister. I never miss 'em. I allus leave my little markin'. An' now get this, the rest of yuh." He glowered at the crowd.

"A fine couple of gunmen you've hired to be deputies, Leighton!" Some man well out of reach of McBride's gun snarled that. "At the very first crack out of the box, they kill our postmaster, and then that half-witted clown with his handy guns knocks down Freeshim Butler. You might tell him that he's struck down a United States commissioner, and maybe that'll put some respect in the damned fool!"

"A commissioner, huh?" McBride grinned wickedly. "Now ain't that too damn bad, gents? Why, it looks like I'm gettin' old or near-sighted. I usually shoot 'em in the belly. Now get out o' the way, all o' yuh. We need some air. *Shake a leg!*"

His guns roared, sending two bullets and twin streaks of spark-showering flame over the heads of the crowd. Instantly there were yells, the sounds of stumbling feet, men driving into each other, some of the floundering and cursing as they went down in their wild dash to clear the passageway.

"You . . . you can't do that, Booger!" Leighton jumped forward, throwing his arms around McBride. "Damn it, you old fool, you're makin' the whole town mad at you right off the trigger!"

"Let 'im alone, Gabe." John Martin had suddenly pushed forward. "The old devil allus goes at a job like a man beatin' bark an' killin' snakes all round 'im, but he somehow manages to get things done in his dumb McBride way. Put up yore guns, Booger. The first rush of the wind's over an' the tail of the cyclone's easin' up. Let's get Spearman outta here an' take 'im down to Dr. Doom."

"Oh, to hell with 'im." McBride's voice was a growl as he holstered his guns. "Let some of his good friends take care of 'im."

BUT . . . but you're too infernally rough-shod, I tell you!" Gabriel Leighton kept repeating that when they were back in the office of the jail and the bodies of Sam Yates and Spearman had been carried down to Doom's. "You just can't go at it in such a barn-storming way. The whole town's roaring its head off right now, and this is the most dangerous town in the canyon when it's aroused!"

"Let the town roar." McBride was busy with an old mop and a large pail of soapy water as he sloppily cleaned the desk and floor. "Me an' Utah'll leastwise get somethin' done round here."

"But . . . but," Leighton continued to object, "you had to add fuel to the flames by knocking down Commissioner Butler. He didn't say a word when he finally got up and staggered out of that alleyway, but you can bet that you haven't seen nor heard the last of him."

"Listen, Gabe, I kind o' like yuh." McBride threw down his mop with a violent sling. His face was angry. He kicked the pail out of his way, upsetting the bloody water all over the floor. "Maybe it's because yo're kind o' kinsfolk. Anyhow, yo're sort o' in on the blind side of the Martin breed, an' bad as us McBrides hate to do it, I've sort o' got to stand belly to the fire with Jawn. But let me tell yuh somethin'. Them tin badges yuh spoke of givin' me an'

Utah can stay in yore pants pockets. If yuh don't like the way me and Utah does things, there's plenty of free range all round the country."

"I don't mean that, Booger!" The sheriff was desperate. "I know that the man Utah killed tonight had something to do with the death of Sam Yates. I—"

A noise outside cut him off. The moon was just coming up, the light flaring down from the canyon rim to eastward. Weldon glanced out the door. A mob of angry men was congregating in front of the jail. Weldon saw coils of rope here and there and heard an angry muttering break out as he walked to the door and unholstered his guns.

"Leighton!" A big, barrel-chested man with a rope in his hand yelled the sheriff's name. "We want to talk to yuh. We ain't here to talk to them two new roosters except in the way they oughta be talked to, an' that's with a rope round their damned necks. Step out, Leighton. This thing's gone far enough, an' that means Rattleweed's ready to take the law in its own hands!"

"And what are you going to do about it?" Weldon's thumbs were on the hammers of his guns. He felt something push up beside him. It was Booger Bill McBride. Then the light was hastily blown out on the old iron safe, and they stood there in the darkness of the doorway and facing the growing mob with Martin, Jedd North, and Leighton suddenly behind them.

"Uncork, yuh dudes!" There was something like diabolical laughter in McBride's tone. "We've met mobs before. Mobs are all alike. Dudes behind yuh will blow loud an' hard to push yuh up to smell the music, but they're way back an' in shape to run. Now what do yuh want?"

"We want you men jailed!" Somebody screeched that behind the crowd in a long-drawn voice. "You're cold-blooded killers, and killers belong in jail or stretched on the end of a rope!"

"Wait a minute! Wait a minute!" Gabriel Leighton shouted. "Take your time, men. This jail office is a regular gun factory. We can hold you off if you start anything. We have everything in here to fight with. I'm the sheriff of Rattleweed, and as long as I am sheriff I'm going to run this town. Back up, Utah." His voice suddenly dropped to a whisper. "We're going to close the door and bar the windows. If it comes to a fight I'm standing with you men until hell freezes over."

"An' now," John Martin's voice came in a low chuckle, "Mr. Sheriff Gabriel Leighton, yo're gettin' right down to bein' the man me an' my gal thought yuh was when she married yuh."

Leighton did not answer him. He stepped forward, caught McBride and Weldon by the shoulders and literally jerked them back into the room. As he started to slam the door a tremendous blast filled the night and shook every stone and timber in the jail.

It was a blast that took place barely fifty yards behind the mob. Several men were knocked off their feet by the concussion. Flying sand and gravel filled the air, and as if giant bombs were being dropped from the air, four more of the tremendous explosions came, one right behind the other, the sand and gravel flying rising in boiling clouds and hurling forward in a whistling rain.

The mob broke. It was pandemonium; it was riot, screeching terror, men dropping their ropes and fleeing through the moonlight—

every man for himself, and the devil take the laggards!

"WHO done it!" Booger Bill McBride was jarred off his feet and knocked flat on his back on the floor when the sixth and seventh explosions came, closer to the jail than the others and perfectly timed to keep the mob on the run once it had started. "Fetch 'im forward an' I'll chaw his ears down!"

Weldon had thrown open the front door. Dust clouded everything out there, and he hastily closed the door to keep the dust and flying gravel from coming into the room. As mystified as the rest, he waited for a few moments. Not one of them could understand what had happened. At one moment they were preparing to fight an angry mob. In the next moment the mob was gone, scattering in all directions.

"Somebody took a hand in our little game to help us out of a growing jam." Weldon spoke, looking at the others in the hazy moonlight coming through the dust and windows. "The mob didn't set off those explosions almost right under every man's feet out there. You must have a few good friends in town, Gabe."

"I have, and they'll stick in spite of everything." Leighton had moved to one of the windows and was staring out in the clouds of dust overhanging everything. "But Butler had friends here, too, and the postmaster had plenty of them in spite of the way he walked around the town like he owned it."

They heard a gentle, almost timid knock on the door. Weldon stepped forward and threw it open. To everybody's surprise, Jasper Barker stood there with his face looking as long and lonesome as a pelican's.

"Howdy," he croaked, still gnawing on one of the pocketful of toothpicks he had taken out of the restaurant. "Thought I'd just drop in. Kinda got lonesome hangin' round the wagon with just Snorky an' the hosses."

"An' where was yuh," McBride wanted to know with a growl, "when the mule hit the woodpile, handsome?"

"I ain't seen no mule, an' I ain't seen no woodpile." Barker's voice was lazy. "If yuh mean where was I at when the mob started scatterin', then I can say I was out there lightin' the last fuse behind an old blacksmith shop."

"A which?" McBride stepped closer.

"Fuse. A fuse." Barker's voice was weary. He leaned against the jamb of the door like a tired cow about to go to sleep. "It was me what set off the dynamite. I heard talk of what was gonna happen an' thought I'd sort o' scotch it a mite." He sighed. "I put Snorky in his box in the wagon, an' sort o' waded in on the show. Yuh see, I'm a regular swap an' peddle feller. I carry a whuppin' big line in that wagon of mine. Bolts of cloth, stockin's for the wimmin, an' flannel drawers an' such like for the men folks. I carry some hardware, chawin' tobacco as well as smokin'; an' I carry some dynamite an' its trimmin's to peddle or swap to settlers in the back country what wanta shoot wells or blow up a rock pile now an' then. It come in handy. I placed a few sticks round tonight. The crowd was so excited nobody didn't even notice the smoke from the fuses." He yawned and stretched himself lazily. "I reckon there ain't none of yuh spendthrifts what'd like to buy a fella another little snack of vittles?"

The unknown man went down under Utah's blazing Winchester!

YUH mean to say," Booger Bill stepped forward and tapped him on the chest with his forefinger, "that yo're the duck what driv that mob right out of our whiskers, Jasper?"

"Don't punch me!" Barker flinched and moved a little to one side. "Yuh heard what I said."

"Well, I'm a hinky-dinky-poolawampus!" A grin was beginning to widen across McBride's face as he reached down and took Barker's hand in a grizzly-bear shake. "When Jawn Martin pays me them back wages, I'll buy a cow an' have the chink cook the whole hind quarters of it for yuh."

" 'Jawn?' Oh, yes, I remember now," Barker said lazily. "I heard some more talk just before I started plantin' out my dynamite. A bunch of fellas behind the livery stables was sort o' quarrelin' among 'emselves. I heard 'em say somethin' 'bout gettin' even with Martin. There was about eight of 'em. Maybe nine. They got on their hosses an' rid out o' town when the mob started gatherin'. That fella Butler was eggin' ever'body an' his dog into it. Yuh own the 4-Bar-40, don't yuh, Jawn?"

"Yes . . . yes, of course I do!" Martin said. "What about it, Jasper?"

"I think yuh oughta go home." Barker yawned again. "That gang what rid out o' town said they was goin' to the 4-Bar-40 an' burn the whole damn thing to the ground an' shoot ever'body in sight what tried to stop 'em. Said they could ruin the whole place before yuh could get home tonight."

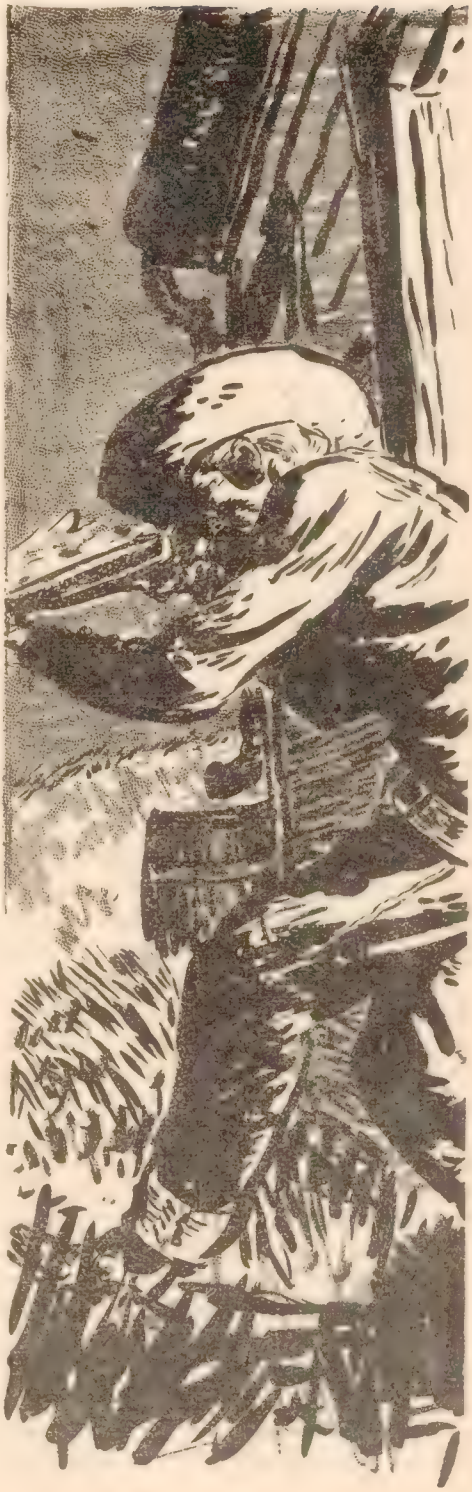
"What?" Martin's voice was a roar. "Wake up, yuh sleepy buzzard, an' tell me what else yuh heard."

"I didn't think there was any

hurry." Barker yawned again, and it was evident now that he had oversampled the two-gallon jug in his wagon. "One of the fellas said 'Fight fire with fire.' From the looks of the brightness in the sky"—he glanced back over his shoulder and up the river to northward—"I'd say that they've already set fire to yore haystacks, Jawn, an' from what I think I hear, they're shootin' up the whole damn place."

"*Well, hang me for a hoss thief!*" Martin roared again and was suddenly thrusting Barker out of the way and leaping outside. Weldon and the others followed him. That there was a fire up the river was a certainty. Blazing sheets of light were flickering high in the air. Above the light boiled tremendous black clouds, billow upon billow rolling high in the sky. Even as Martin and the others stood there, gripped with silence by the sight they were looking at, it seemed to Weldon that he could hear the distant *pop-popping* of heavy gun firing.

"Get . . . get our hosses!" Martin's voice was a wild wail. "They . . . they're wipin' me out, an' there ain't nobody home but the wimmin-folks an' my chink cook to fight them off!"



CHAPTER VIII

TRAPPED

RIDE, an' ride hard for it!" Mounted on a tall white horse, John Martin was soon splitting the wind with the others thundering along the old river trail with him. "Only this mornin' I sent ever' cowboy on the place to the north side of the range. Only Elizabeth an' Zell an' Mary's there, Gabe. Old Wing Lung's with 'em, but he'll be worth about as much in a gun fight as a cow without a tail in fly time."

Jedd North was with them. From the start it had been a problem as to what they were going to do with the boy. Weldon had thought it settled when John Martin said he would take the boy to the 4-Bar-40 with him, but developments after that had come so rapidly there had been no opportunity to give a sensible thought to the boy. But he was riding with them, and he had brought along three bandoleers of cartridges and an old .403 Winchester grizzly rifle from the locker in the office of the jail. Given half a chance, he would show what he was made of.

They topped a rimrocked rise a mile north of Rattleweed from which they could see the 4-Bar-40. It was there on a high bank on the western side of the river. Tall cottonwoods and willows surrounded the log-and-stone ranchhouse, the sheds and corrals. In the furnace-like glare of burning haystacks and one of the long sheds, it looked as if a hard-fought battle was raging to its peak.

In a few moments, mounted men could be seen galloping back and forth on a ridgelike rise west of the houses. Gashes of fire jerked from the backs of the running horses, and from the western side of the house squirty little flames leaped like hot tongues toward the men on the ridge.

"Wait, this won't do!" Weldon was spurring his racing black and swinging up close to John Martin. "We've got to swing to the left! Let's get over behind that ridge and take those riders from the blind side of the fight. We're fools to ride right on into the light and make ourselves wide-open targets, Mr. Martin!"

McBride agreed with Weldon as he usually did when they were going into a fight. "What Utah says is gospel truth. We've got to hit 'em from the blind side. Swing to the left, yuh old wart hawg! Ain't yuh got a lick of sense?"

"But . . . but the main house is goin' to take fire any minute!"

"What of it, yuh old fool!" McBride's voice was explosive with the lack of patience. "When the main house catches they can go out the back way an' slide down to the river if the fire gets too hot for 'em!"

"Yo've forgot how the main house is built, Booger." Martin was beginning to show fight to keep them from swinging his horse to the left. "The back doors of the kitchen an' dinin' room ain't twenty feet from the rim of them cliffs above the river. It's a straight-down drop of more'n sixty feet to the water. Ain't no way for 'em to go down to the water unless they turn all holds loose an' jump for it, Booger. Yuh know wimminfolks can't do a fool thing like that."

"If the fire gets hot enough, they'll sprout wings an' fly!" Booger Bill McBride was still trying to make the running white horse swing to the left. "Nothin' ain't downwind impossible when yo've got enough heat behind yuh."

"Leave my Banjo horse alone!" Martin swung his horse to the left with a quick sawing of the reins, then whipped the big animal back to the right. The horse struck McBride's old roan with his shoulder. For a few wild plunges it looked as if the stumbling roan would go down. Only sheer horsemanship on the part of McBride saved the horse.

"Yo're goin' to the left, I tell yuh!" McBride roared that at him. "Yuh an' Gabe go that way. Me an' Utah'll plunge on up in the thick of it an' be there to help the wimmin

if they have to run for it. Get goin', yuh old fool. There never was a Martin with sense enough to carry on a decent fight, even if he had the feller he was tryin' to whip bound an' gagged an' tied to a plank! *Go on!*"

Reluctantly Martin and Gabe Leighton swung away to the left. Jedd North wanted to keep on behind Weldon and Booger, but Weldon ordered him to go with the other two.

IT was two riding fools going straight in on burning damnation after that. Soon they could hear bullets whistling around them. Some of them came from the men on the ridge, but when Weldon felt one slap through the right side of the brim of his hat, he knew that they were also being fired on by the Martin women from the south windows in the main ranchhouse.

"They don't know us, Booger!" Weldon yelled. "They're opening up on us, thinking we belong to the crowd on the ridge. Swing to the right, closer to the river!"

"Yuh wait, Utah!" There was a wild note in McBride's voice as if he had just thought of something out of the dim, far past. "Wait'll yuh hear this. Liz Martin would know it in hell."

He stood in his stirrups and cupped both hands to his mouth. Of all the sounds Utah Dave Weldon had ever heard, none could have been compared to the one old Booger Bill McBride uttered. It started like the wail of a big black timber wolf. It soared up, became a fierce braying, and then turned to something that might have been the wicked screaming of a catamount in a canebreak, a sound that jarred every nerve in a man's body and made him feel as if every tooth was suddenly aching.

"*Ya-a-a-a-zoo-ooo!*" McBride was finishing the first call. "*Yee-ee-ah-hh-hoo-oo, Ya-a-a-a-zoo-ooo,* an' *Miss-issi—sippi swamp habbits, too!*"

Still riding like a hellion, McBride again sent the call soaring out into the night. If anything it was more wicked than the first cry. The sounds ran through Weldon, ached his teeth, and prickled him from the ends of his toes to the top of his head as if he was being shocked by rapidly applied volts of electricity.

An answering cry came from the west, from over beyond the ridgelike rise. That was John Martin sending out the cry. It was not as fierce as McBride's but it was very near the same thing, and it served its purpose. The firing from the windows in the south end of the old ranchhouse was suddenly silenced. Weldon thought he heard some answering cry come back to them above the thudding pound of the flying hoofs, and then there was hell to pay on the ridgelike rise, showing that Gabriel Leighton and John Martin were in their places and opening up with their guns.

Old Booger Bill's roan stepped in a hole and went down when they were thirty yards from the south end of the house. It was an old-fashioned *hoola-hand,* the horse's head going down, rump coming up and over. With the agility of a monkey leaving a saddle and flying through space, McBride escaped. He struck the ground in a loose, bounding ball and was up by the time his horse was plunging to his feet. He swung in beside the horse, snatched his old rifle from the saddle, and moved on toward the rear of the house like a running bear.

Weldon had already reached the

rear corner of the house. He leaped to the ground with his rifle in his hand and halted just long enough to slap his horse across the rump with his hat and send the black galloping off and out of immediate danger.

"*Ya-a-a-a-zoo-ooo!*" McBride was yelling over and over again.

"Bill!" A woman's voice called from inside the house. "*Booger Bill McBride!*"

"Hi-ya, Liz!" McBride's voice boomed. "If I don't have to call yuh *Lizzy-beeth*, then the handsomest man unhung from the Yazoo Bottoms will come in!"

"Bill!" One of the back doors flew open and a tall, white-haired woman who was still beautiful at fifty appeared. She rushed toward McBride, and threw her arms around him. "I heard the old Yazoo call! I knew it was you! I told the girls it was Booger Bill!"

"An' added that the devil, 'imself, had arrived, I'll bet!" McBride's roaring had become a growl. "How the hell are yuh, Liz?" He pushed her away from him in the blazing light from the direction of the corrals and sheds. "Don't mess up my hair 'fore I can get a good look at yuh. Yuh don't look a whit better'n yuh used to. Just like a battle-ax oughta look! Jawn oughta pickle yuh in a whiskey barrel. Whiskey gets better with age, an' it might he'p even a Henshaw what's married to a Martin, but I'm doubtin' it."

The rest was like somebody suddenly drawing a black sheet over everything. Weldon felt a quick, violent pain dart hard across his collar bone, felt himself reeling and turning on his heel. McBride's wild-voiced cry of alarm came to him, but he could not tell what Booger Bill was saying. He had an instant impression of jagged stabs of hot, red light breaking from the rims of the cliffs up and down the river, and then he was going down, slumping to his knees and pitching forward on his face without knowing that he and Booger Bill McBride had ridden into a baited trap whose jaws were suddenly and mercilessly closing on them.

BOOGER McBRIDE picked up Weldon and the latter's rifle and rushed on into the dining room with him. Elizabeth Martin was just ahead of them. As soon as they were inside she whirled and slammed closed the heavy oaken door.

"Take him on into the living room, Bill!" she cried. "It's safer in there!"

Bullets seemed to be coming from everywhere, and McBride was well aware of the trick that had been played upon them. Not for a moment did he doubt the sincerity of Jasper Barker. The pot-and-pan peddler had heard every word just as he had told it to them. The men who had been talking in the rear of the livery stable had evidently known that Jasper was there in the darkness. They had simply used him as a vehicle to help them carry out their plot, and now the plot was unfolding itself. Every sign of human life at the 4-Bar-40 was going to be destroyed, every building burned to the ground. Men had sneaked up the river while others on the ridgelike rise to the west were holding all attention in that direction. Now the main house was surrounded from every side, and the devil alone knew how many men there were out there for a man to fight.

"Get a bucket of cold water!" McBride snapped that order from the side of his mouth as he stretched

Weldon out on his back on the living-room floor in front of the wide-mouthed old fireplace in which a lighted lamp had been placed so that no glow of it would show out the windows. "From what I can tell, only a mite of hide's knocked off the collar bone. That's the way they used to crease wild hosses down in Arizony. Knocked 'em out cold for a little spell, an' then they was up an' ready to travel if yuh wasn't there Johnny-on-the-spot to hogtie 'em down. Hi-ya, Mary!" He looked up at a tall, dark-haired young woman who was just moving back from a window with a hot Winchester in her hands. "They're a-sayin' yuh got yoreself married off to a law critter.

"An' hi-ya, Zell!" He chuckled as he looked at another tall, reddish-haired girl turning around after firing a shot at somebody up the river. "Yuh gals have shore growed up. Nope." He waved them aside as they started toward him. "Keep up yore fightin'. Liz, yuh take charge of Utah. Yuh was allus handy fixin' up a man with a bullet in 'im. Pour the cold water to this dude an' get 'im on his feet. Yo'll see some of the best fightin' yo've ever seen since—"

"Since Grandpa Johnny, yes!" the woman cried. "I know all about it. Get away from that man and start fighting! I know how to take care of him. Come here for a minute and help me, Zell."

"Wimmin are great." McBride whispered that under his breath as he got up and hurried back in the dining room. "Plumb sound an' stout if yuh can get 'em mad enough."

He was fighting from that moment on, a raging old lion darting from window to window, firing a shot here, another there. At any moment he expected the old roof to burst into flames. It was already hotter than blazes in the north end of the house. He dropped a man two hundred yards away on the cliffs above the river, and saw the man hastily drag himself back and behind a big blue rock. A moment later he saw the flames loll low and lick toward the house. Then the flames were changing as the wind suddenly swept around and came in a sharp blast from the west.

"May make it out yet," he chuckled. "I'm hopin' for it, anyhow, just for Jawn's sake. The old ha'nt!"

He banged back to the kitchen end of the room and blazed away at a gash of flame down the river. Bullets drove him back from the window. He turned and headed for one of the bedrooms in the north end of the house. As he stepped into a room where heavy blinds were drawn over the window and a candle burned weakly on an old bureau in the corner, he saw a pair of wide brown eyes suddenly sink from sight behind the head of the bed.

A .45 leaped into McBride's hand and roared. A wild yell answered, and a Chinaman appeared, a short, wrinkle-faced old monkey of a man screeching at the top of his lungs for his life.

"*Dje go szï ní dzo bùh dèh!*" The Chinaman wailed in perfect Mandarin, but to Booger Bill McBride it was just a jumble of sound.

"Oh, is that so?" McBride sneered at him. "Quit talkin' in yore bohunk, Wing Lung, an' get the hell out o' here an' do some fightin'! Make some noise! Do somethin' to leastwise let 'em know what side yo're bettin' on!" *Bang!* He sent a bullet splintering into the floor at the Chinaman's feet. "Shuffle! Get a gun, I tell yuh!"

"Don't you dare shoot Wing Lung!" There was a sound of scraping furniture on the floor as another screechlike voice filled the room and an enormous woman of about forty with wild red hair and bulging brown eyes stepped from behind the old bureau. "He . . . he's scared, just like I'm scared. Who are you, b-bursting in here like this?"

"Who, me?" McBride jabbed his chest with his thumb. "Why . . . why, this is powerful unexpected." He stepped back, dragging off his hat, a quick grin crossing his face. "An' exceedin'ly pleasant, ma'am. I am—"

"*Bill!*" Elizabeth Martin had come hurrying into the room. "Bill, what in the world are you doing to old Wing and Miss Little?"

" 'Little?' " He turned and looked at the fat woman owlishly. "Hell's delight, she's as big as the side of the house! But . . . but don't get mad, ma'am!" He held up his hand quickly. "I like 'em that way."

IT took almost fifteen minutes to bring Utah Dave Weldon to his senses. His eyes opened at last and he found the pretty Zell Martin bending over him. The girl and her mother had cut away the left arm and right shoulder of his shirt, and his shoulder felt as cold as ice. Pain jabbed through it as he sat up, listening to the sounds of the shots. He saw the lamp in the fireplace, then Mary Leighton moving back from a window. But there was no time for talk, and he got up groggily.

"Thank you, ma'am." He spoke to Zell Martin with a one-sided, pain-twisted grin. "Where . . . where's Booger Bill? Did he come through all right or did they drop him when they dropped me?"

"He's in a back room trying to start an argument with a schoolteacher!" Zell Martin was already reaching to the table to take up her rifle again. "But mother knows how to handle him! Are you all right now?"

"Fine!"

He lied about that, but he was soon into the fight, moving rapidly from one window to another. He took one or two shots here and there, keeping always on the move and trying to make the fighting as hot as possible. He heard McBride roaring at Mary Leighton a few minutes later. A hot firing from the cliffs above the burning sheds had driven the man out of the north bedroom. Now McBride was stamping into the living room.

"Here, yuh, Mary!" McBride bawled that at the sheriff's wife. "Yuh used to knock a piano mighty well. Get atter that big bull of a thing in the corner an' knock us out somethin' rippin' an' rearin'."

"This is no time for music!" Elizabeth Martin said impatiently. "What do you think this is, a circus?"

"Why, hell, yes!" McBride yelled between rifle blasts out a window. "Yore Jawn an' Mary's sheriff husband are out there behind that rise to the west. It'll tell 'em things are comin' along fine in the house an' that there ain't no use in 'em worryin'."

"You're crazy!"

"Of course, I am or I wouldn't be here!" McBride could be heard angrily stamping his feet. "But yuh play, Mary. Get at it, I tell yuh! Give us 'Billie the Kid,' a good old rip-rearin' outlaw song. Yuh do what I tell yuh or I'll knock yuh down! Didn't yuh hear me say it'll let Jawn know we're happy as bohunks at a barn dance an' ever'thing's well?"

It was crazy at the beginning, but Utah Dave Weldon expected it. Everything old Booger Bill McBride did was usually crazy but there was no way in which he could be halted once he had set his head to a notion.

The music started up haltingly. It grew louder and louder. Soon the house seemed to rock and reel with it, and it was exactly what McBride had called for. It was "Billie the Kid," a "Billie the Kid" that threatened to shake the rafters down. There was something contagious about it. McBride started to sing in his braying, unmelodious voice. Weldon swore under his breath, and a minute later caught himself humming the tune.

It was the Southwest at its damnedest! The ring of the outlaw spur was there, the rollicking, rippling, the reverberating rattle and rumble of hoofs beating through a black night, the crash of guns, the *smack!* and *whang!* of bullets

"Louder, *louder!*" McBride kept bawling. "Tear the house down, gal! Make that honkatonk organ sing!"

A yell came from somewhere. Weldon heard it from one of the windows. There was no mistake about it coming from John Martin, still fighting over there behind the ridgelike rise. McBride had been right. The music was telling Martin and Leighton that everything was well, and Martin's old Yazoo Bottoms yell was like a cheer.

With the music still roaring, Weldon brought the sights of his rifle down on a crawling figure in a little wash south of the house. His finger curled on the trigger. He halted the gently squeezing finger an instant before the rifle would have fired, and lowered his rifle, fascinated.

Jedd North crawled out of the end of the little wash a moment later. He got up and, running wildly, headed for the back door while Weldon shot over the boy's head like a madman to silence the firing of the men in the cliffs down the river and give Jedd his chance to reach the safety of the house.

"You little fool!" Weldon felt like boxing the boy's ears as he came bursting in at the door. "I thought I told you—"

"It ain't a-makin' no difference what yuh told me, Utah!" the boy cried. "It got hotter'n hell out there. I didn't go on with the sheriff an' Mr. Martin. I turned my hoss loose an' dropped off in a little wash. I started shootin' at them men on the rise, an' a gang down the river found me out an' started poppin' lead at me. If I'd stayed where I was they would 'a' got me shore. I—"

Yells from up and down the river cut him off. Weldon whirled and saw the north end of the long room suddenly brightening. Flames from another shed were licking at the end of the house, and it looked like the old place was taking fire at last.

CHAPTER IX

NEWS FROM RATTLEWEED

"SHE'S afire, Utah." Booger Bill McBride came stumbling into the dining room, coughing violently from smoke. "That last lick-over of the flames from the second shed sideswiped the end of the whole house. Looks like we're sort o' gettin' stuck like flies in the butter bowl."

"There's a well there in the corner!" Elizabeth and Zell Martin came hurrying into the room. "Drag Wing Lung out from behind the piano, Mary! You and Yardletta Little bring him in here! He can

pump water even if he can't handle a Winchester."

"It's gonna be like the mice tyin' a bell on a cat, Liz." McBride coughed out the words with his face as red as a beet. "Who's gonna run outside an' get shot as they try to slosh the water on the end of the house? *Yardletta!* Umph!"

"Something must be done, *Will-yam!*" The woman screamed that at McBride, and by the very sound of that "*Will-yam!*" Weldon knew it was calculated to make old Booger Bill fighting mad. "Does a Henshaw-Martin have to lead the way for you?"

"No Henshaw-Martin never led the way for a Yazoo Bottoms McBride, *Liz* Martin!" McBride was exploding himself. "Me an' Utah are holdin' off hell here. We're outnumbered a heap. Must be twenty to one agin' us, but yuh don't see us losin' no ground. We'd whip the whole mess if they'd come out in a bunch an' fight, but—"

Thunder, lightning, and damnation, coming in one blinding blast knocked him off his feet. The whole house appeared to rise in the air, to lurch upward and shake as if in the sudden grip of a cyclone, and then to settle back with a terrific jolt that seemed to jar a man's teeth loose in their sockets. Dishes came pouring down in a crashing and smashing flood from their racks against the inner wall of the dining room. Pots and pans rattled like gongs in the kitchen. Elizabeth and Zell Martin were hurled back against the wall. Wing Lung had just appeared in the doorway to the living room with Mary Leighton and the enormous Yardletta Little. With a wail of terror, Wing Lung whirled. He knocked both the women off their feet on his wild dash back to safety behind the piano, and Yardletta Little came rolling and bounding on into the room to land atop of old Booger Bill.

"Hell's delight!" McBride had been a little dazed, but the impact had knocked all that out of him. "Yuh here ag'in? Felt like a hoss fell on me! Ain't she a whopper, Utah? *Yardletta Little!* Built like the Powder River, a mile wide an' a yard—"

Another explosion halted him. It came from the edge of the cliffs northeast of the house. Rocks came whistling through the air. Windows were shattered, the glassware showering in every direction. More dishes came crashing down from the racks. An iron kettle on the stove danced crazily. After that it was one explosion after another, the rocks flying up and down the river, and terror-stricken men yelling.

"First shot blowed the fire out on the end of the house!" McBride yelped that when there was a lull in the explosions long enough for him to catch his breath.

They heard hoofs pounding a few minutes after that. They were hoofs that were tearing toward the house from the west. Not until that moment had anyone noticed that the main flare of firelight had suddenly died away to glowing coals and a few scattered little flames burning out there toward the corrals.

"Hit the front of the house, Utah!" McBride slammed his upper plate in his mouth and came lurching to his feet. "They're chargin' right down on us!"

"No, they ain't, Booger!" Jedd North had been in the living room. Since the moment he had entered the house he had been taking a part in the fight with the old .403 Winchester grizzly rifle. Now he was bursting wide-eyed into the dining

room. "It's the sheriff an' Mr. Martin. I reckon the gang what was fightin' us got cold feet an' hightailed it back to Rattleweed!"

SHORE, they hightailed it!" John Martin was saying that in an excited voice a few minutes later as he and Gabriel Leighton came bursting into the room. "They're all gone. We beat off the gang west of us, though it looked for a long time like they had us right where they wanted us. Made us take to a rock pile. Worst thing they could have done for 'emselves. Are yuh all right, Elizabeth?"

"Of course she's all right." Old Booger Bill grinned. "An' so's our little Yardletta. How could they be elsewise with a McBride around? But what was that shootin' that almost tore the house down, Jawn?"

"Dynamite, I reckon, Booger."

They went outside, looking along the cliffs. Somebody had thrown dynamite right into a flaming haystack and a burning shed. The terrific explosion had blown the shed and haystack apart, scattering the fire in every direction. With no one to bother them, they set to work with wet sacks, beating out the scattered fire and saving the rest of the outbuildings and sheds. During the work there was no time for talk, and when they returned to the house they found that Wing Lung had made a huge pot of black coffee for them.

Fire-reddened and smoke-blackened, they sat down at the table while the womenfolk and the Chinaman took up places outside to see that the gunmen from Rattleweed did not return for a surprise attack.

"Lagon come!" Wing Lung came racing back inside the house with alarm in his eyes. "*Ding-ee-dang-ee-dlong-dlong-ee* like-ee hell-ee!" He held his nose and fluttered his lips with a forefinger to make the sounds. "Big lagon!"

"An' now we'll soon know about that dynamite!" McBride arose from the table and kicked back his chair. "If that ain't Jasper Barker an' his hawg, then I'm a mule-eared hoss thief!"

There was little doubt about it. The rattling and clattering was getting closer, coming from northward. Soon they could hear the old wheels creaking. In a little while the wagon drew up in front of the house. With the women retreating in front of him, Barker came shuffling on inside, through the living room and to

the dining-room door. They took one glance at him and saw that he looked as hopelessly drunk as a man could get and still manage to walk.

"Howdy, folks!" His voice was like the thin bleat of a goat. "Need any pots an' pans, drawers for the menfolks, geegaws an' knick-knacks for the gals?"

"An' where at an' from did you come, high pocket?" McBride took out his upper plate and carefully slipped it in his pocket as if afraid of losing it. "Are yuh the hawg-eyed wompus what throwed all that dynamite?"

"I ain't." Barker's sad eyes looked as if they were about to shed tears. "I didn't throw the first stick, Booger, but I did throw the rest. I reckon they was usin' my trick. They was gonna blow yuh up as well as burn yuh up, but I got here just as they started throwin' their dynamite. I hit a stick of my dynamite right agin' the feller what was startin' the throwin'. The dynamite he had went off right under him, an' he sort o' sailed off with it. Yuh see, I've been through these parts. Four or five years ago, it was. I knowed how this house was built. Knowed that the gorge where the river goes through ain't no more'n sixty feet wide right here. So I hooked up my team an' crossed the bridge in Rattleweed. I pulled up behind them jackpines on the other side of the cliffs, an' just sort o' started in."

"An' . . . an' how'd yuh get here?"

"Do I have to write yuh a letter?" Barker pushed his hat to the back of his head and came on into the room. "I just driv on up to that break in the cliffs a mile above here, an' come across the ford in the river." He sat down heavily at the end of the table. "Is coffee all the vittles yo've got to feed a man, Jawn?"

"John!" Elizabeth Martin's voice came before Martin could answer. "There's a strange-looking light down the canyon toward Rattleweed. I wonder what's happening!"

"Oh, yeah, I forgot." Barker scratched the back of his neck and turned his long, sad face toward Gabe Leighton. "Some of 'em what was mad at yuh, sheriff, sort o' got a damn sight madder atter yuh left. They set fire to the jailhouse. It spread to the blacksmith shop, an' the blacksmith shop set fire to Strewberry's Saloon, an'—well, ho-hum," he yawned sleepily, "from what I could see at the last place I looked back, I reckon it looks like the whole town's burnin' down."

KEEP yore shirt on, Gabe, keep yore shirt on!" Barker limply lifted his hand when Sheriff Leighton arose with a quick lurch and a backward kick that sent his chair sliding against the wall through the shattered bits of dishes on the floor. "Ain't yuh seen enough fire an' gun smoke for one night?"

"But . . . but I'm the sheriff!" Leighton's eyes were wide with excitement. His face was bloodless as he stared at the window toward Rattleweed, his hands opening and closing. "I've got to get back to town and do something about that fire!"

"Why?" Barker turned that long, sad face toward him, and for an instant something like a twinkle lighted his ogling green eyes. "Just what could *yuh* do that ain't bein' done by others who'd like to see the town saved? Besides, a sheriff without a jail is like a bail without a pail. Set down. Take the hunk off yore feet an' rest yoreself! There's people what maybe sort o' expect

yuh to come headin' back for Rattleweed like a feller with a wild cat clawin' at the seat of his britches." He yawned, lifting and stretching his arms sleepily, and then glanced at the white-faced John Martin. "Look here, ain't yuh got a damn bit of vittles outside of just this plain black coffee, Jawn? It's so stout it'd stomp a mule's ears down. I'm hungry. I reckon I ain't had enough to eat for nigh a week. Bein' a travelin' merchant—"

"Now, look here, smart feller!" Old Booger Bill McBride was suddenly on his feet. "Quit yore actin' like a sick cow! Yo've got somethin' up yore sleeve. Just who in the hell are yuh, Jasper Barker? Peddlin' tin ain't yore whole an' only line. I know that, an' I'm tired of yore hoss-play. When I get tired, feller, I get mad, an' when I get mad I get mean."

"Steady!"

"Don't move!"

"We've got you covered!"

"Put up yore hands, ever'body!"

The four distinct voices came from everywhere. With the excitement caused by the coming of Jasper Barker, old Wing Lung and the Martin womenfolks had relaxed their vigilance. Slipping from shadow to shadow, a little mob of heavily armed men had crept up on the house. The glinting tubes of a sawed-off shotgun now looked into the dining room from the north window with wicked black eyes shining down the barrels. Another man was in the doorway to the living room with a tall, nervous man in a red bandanna mask holding the weapon. Two more of the dangerous weapons had come sliding in through the shattered windows in the eastern wall of the dining room, covering everyone in it.

"Yuh ain't got a chance, none of yuh!" the man in the doorway rasped. "Come on in, boys, an' start shakin' 'em down for their guns. *Easy, McBride!* I know yuh! I know that Utah Dave Weldon with yuh, too. Yo're a couple of slick gunmen, but yuh can't get anywheres this time."

"Nice surprise you gents gave us." McBride started to sit down. A snarling voice from the window behind him kept him standing. "Yuh boys shore get things done round these parts."

"There are others who get things done around here, also." A tall, thin man in black with his face hidden by a mask had entered through the door toward the river. In his black-gloved hands were a pair of six-shooters. In a few minutes every man in the dining room was relieved of his six-shooters. As the masked man snatched away each pair of weapons, he stepped to the window and tossed them outside. "Back up against the wall, all of you! Be quick about it!" He fired a bullet into the floor under McBride's feet. "That goes for you women. *Move!*"

"I still say yuh dudes get things done." McBride could not keep his mouth shut. "I'm sort o' admirin' the way yuh go about it, mister."

"And others get things done, as I said." The man in black stepped back, watching them closely as five more men came in the room holding sawed-off shotguns. "Our good friend you called the tin peddler manages to do things quite rapidly. Bring in his prisoner, boys."

"He's already a-comin'." The man with the bandanna chuckled behind his mask and stepped to one side as footsteps sounded stumblingly in the living room. "Zack an' Steve had to rub his legs so he

could walk atter they warped the hawg over the head with a six-shooter an' took our friend out o' that wagon an' cut the ropes off of 'im."

THE footsteps came on. To Dave Weldon's surprise, he saw a tall man come careening and stumbling through the doorway. The man was Freeshim Butler, and just behind him were two burly ruffians holding to his arms to support him. They helped the man to a chair, and Butler sat down heavily, as if all the strength had been drained out of him.

Weldon could see that Freeshim Butler had been severely manhandled. His wrists were red and almost raw when Butler placed his hands on the table. From his swollen and broken mouth there was a deep, red mark in the skin, indicating that he had been gagged.

"Jasper Barker proved to be a decidedly handy man." The man in black was speaking again. He was without a question the leader of the gang. "He kidnaped Freeshim in Rattleweed, and took him out of town in his old wagon. You can talk now, Freeshim." He glanced at the nearly helpless commissioner sitting there in a slumped figure at the end of the table. "We've got everything right where we want it. Go ahead! What did he do to you?"

"He caught me alone in the dark." Freeshim Butler's voice was jerky, and his breath came in gasps. "Jabbed a gun in my ribs and took me to his wagon. Drove out of town with me. Came over on the other side of the river and dynamited the boys. Then he was about to dynamite me. That is, I thought he was going to do it. He tied a dummy stick of dynamite to the side of my head. A dummy stick with a fuse in it. The fuse was lighted. The dripping tar burned my neck. I . . . I finally said I'd talk. He took out the gag and—"

"And you spilled your guts, eh!" There was a sneer in the leader's tone. "You told him everything!"

"I . . . I had to tell him!" Freeshim Butler whimpered. "I . . . I thought that was a real stick of dynamite tied to my jaw. I didn't know that the old fool was only bluffing me!"

"But you did know that I don't like men who can be bluffed." Like a creeping octopus the masked man was suddenly moving up behind the commissioner, the muzzles of the big guns in his hands now pointing to the floor. "You knew the penalty!"

"Now, don't try that on me!" Freeshim Butler started to lurch out of his chair. "I . . . I'm no common damned gunman you can kill like a dog!"

"Sit still!" One of the six-shooters in the masked man's hand had suddenly lifted. It jabbed downward, planting itself in Butler's chest and driving him back into his chair. "A man who will weaken and talk in one place will talk in another. You knew the orders. You knew the game. You should know every angle of it. I made you what you are. I made Alec Spearman what he was before Weldon killed him. The only man I failed to beat was Gabriel Leighton when the cattle and sheep crowds of the canyon pooled themselves behind him." The man laughed softly, a hollow, spiritless laugh. "I never forgive a man when he fails me, Freeshim. We played a dangerous game here. Your part is about finished."

Freeshim Butler just sat there.

His swollen and broken mouth worked soundlessly. His eyes were like bullets, bright and glinty bullets half pushed from the muzzles of guns and staring in wild terror down the table. Suddenly he tried to stand up again. A thundering roar filled the room. Sparks of fire blew in bursting and scattering streaks in every direction from between Butler's shoulder blades. Like a huge bullfrog making his last dying leap, the man shot up and out of his chair. With a smashing crash he plowed face-forward on the table.

"A bit cold-blooded, you might say." The man in black stepped back, the rising gun smoke a blue halo around his head, the acrid bite of the burned powder filling the room. "It's the way I usually play. Turning men's blood cold is a habit of mine. What's that? Did someone say something?"

He looked down the table through the holes in his mask. There had been a slight, squashlike noise that had sounded against the wall. Yardletta Little had slumped to the floor in a faint.

CHAPTER X

BATTLE ROYAL

PICK up that woman and throw her in a chair!" The man in black rasped that, the muzzles of his guns weaving over the little group. "Watch yourselves!" His voice was a bark as his eyes centered themselves on Utah Dave Weldon and old Booger Bill McBride. "I know you two fine birds. You play a close game when you're in a tight. But you won't get a chance this time. Get that woman up, I said."

Weldon and McBride moved toward the schoolteacher. As they stooped both saw something. It was a trapdoor there in the floor at the end of the table. That it led down to a cellar beneath the dining room was a certainty, but there was no chance for them to lift it and drop out of sight just now.

There was no chance for a man to do anything except what he was told to do. Weldon and McBride simply picked up Yardletta Little. It was a job, for the woman must have weighed close to three hundred pounds. With McBride grunting like a man lifting a log, they placed the woman in an old chair. It was like lighting a string of firecrackers and having them all start exploding at the same time. The chair groaned, and then crackled. An elephant could not have demolished it any quicker than Yardletta Little. The chair turned to kindling wood flying in all directions. It went down, spreading out all over the floor with the unconscious woman sitting on the wreckage like a bear trying to hatch a nest of eggs.

"Let her stay there!" The man in black waved his guns. "Move back to where you belong. Keep those hands up, John Martin! I'm watching every move you make. Bring in some ropes, boys. This whole mess must be in the river before daylight. You heard that, I guess, John Martin." The eyes beyond the holes in the mask seemed to glint with a strange glee. "In the river all of you go, with stones in a sack to keep the lot of you there until this entire canyon fills with water. By that time you'll all be so water-logged you'll never rise to the surface, and there'll be too much excitement going on in this canyon today for anyone to come looking for you.

"You had your opportunity two years ago, Martin." The man in

black cleared his throat softly. "You run the largest outfit in the canyon. Hints were dropped to you about allowing you to get in on the ground floor in a very great venture. You were a fool with your talk of a quiet, peaceful existence." He laughed bitterly. "You're sorry now, I'll wager."

"I ain't sorry, an' yuh didn't need to come here in that mask." Martin's voice arose in a burst of fury. "I know who yuh are. I know what yore game is, but it still ain't played out. Yuh can kill us. Yuh can dump us in that deep suck-hole just down the river where if a steer drops in he's gone forever. But that still won't make a hell of a lot of difference. There'll still be cowmen an' some few sheepmen left in the canyon to fight yuh. They'll not back down no matter how many men yuh kill. Yuh—"

"Ain't nobody a-gonna die—*Easy! Drop them guns!*" A jarring, half-whining old voice came from the window behind the man in black. Weldon glanced toward it and saw the twin muzzle of a double-barreled muzzle-loader shotgun. "I'm bossin' this here party now. Drop them guns, I tell yuh! If I touch off these triggers I'll tear the house down! Just start killin' 'em from the windows, boys. *Shoot 'em!*"

"No, wait!" A wail came from one of the desperadoes with the man in black, and a pair of six-shooters dropped to the floor as the man lifted his hands. "We . . . we ain't got no chance agin' a scatter-gun like . . . like that thing!"

"I'll remember that, when we get out of here!" The man in black looked as if he was about to shoot down the other man. "You'll get the same treatment I gave Butler!"

"Don't stand an' jaw in there!" the jarring voice warned. "Move. Drop yore guns or the boys'll blow yuh down!"

"Let's kill them and be done with it!" A second voice came now. For a moment Weldon had thought the man at the window was bluffing. The coming of a second voice from beyond the rear door of the dining room was assurance that the man with the shotgun was not alone. "That's the way they handle people. They give no quarter, and they never have." There was a short laugh, and it seemed to Weldon that a ghost was speaking out there. "Shoot them!"

THE man in black shrugged and moved toward the table as if to thrust his six-shooters upon it. His coolness was almost awe-inspiring. He seemed to be laughing behind his mask. "Throw down your guns, boys."

"Now yo're actin' sensible." The man with the shotgun behind him chuckled. "It's the way I like to see men act."

"But you be a little sensible at the same time." The man in black spoke across his shoulder just as he was sliding his weapons on the table. "Never shoot into a dark room filled with people. *You might kill the women!*"

The last sentence came violently, a wild uprush of words. The old lamp Wing Lung had lighted was suddenly smashed into thousands of splinters of flying glass from one side-swiping slap from the gun in the man's right hand. The room was plunged into darkness. Only one stab of light flashed through it, and that came from the weapon that had smashed the lamp as the man in black whirled away.

There was an oath, a sob of pain,

and the man who had been the first to drop his six-shooters was staggering back against the wall with both hands gripping the pit of his stomach and the blood squirting through his fingers.

"That's the pay I give men who surrender too quickly, Mr. Batch!" The words came with a wild rush of feet. The man in black had killed his man, and now he was escaping through the living room and toward horses under the trees beyond the old hitch rack. "Good night to all of you dumb fools who can't fight your way out of a little trap like that!"

But it was not good night as far as Utah Dave Weldon was concerned. He heard the rush start toward the men left in the room. He heard a six-shooter roar as some man snatched it up. Then Booger Bill McBride's voice was filling the room.

"Eat 'em alive, damn 'em!" A fist smashed home. A chair crashed against the wall. "Chaw their ears down!"

But Weldon was going on. He darted into the living room, remembering the spot where he had seen Zell Martin stand a Winchester against the wall. He darted to it, snatched it up, and bounded out the door just as a dark form under the trees whirled and opened fire on him with bullets splintering into the jamb of the doorway.

Weldon started shooting the old Winchester from the hip. His first shot was a miss. It was the same with the second, but the third turned the dark form under the trees. The man out there staggered, fired another shot at the door. Then with the Winchester leaping to his shoulder, Weldon whirled the man in his tracks and sent him pitching face-forward on the ground. He sent one more shot into the man after he was down, and then whirled back to the wild hell going on in the dining room.

IT was hell indeed in the dining room. Yardletta Little had recovered. Elizabeth Martin, Zell, and Mary Leighton had helped the woman out of the wreckage of the chair, and all of them had escaped through the old trapdoor to the cellar, leaving the room free for the men to fight.

As Weldon bounded into the room he saw a six-shooter flash. In the flicker of light he saw McBride. Old Booger Bill had seized a cast-iron frying pan from somewhere. As the gun flashed almost in his face, McBride brought the frying pan down on a man's head, crushing his skull and sending the man sprawling to the floor.

Including the man in black, there had been eight crowded into the room with drawn guns when the old man with the shotgun appeared at the window. One of them had been shot down by the man in black. Another had just died from that wildly swinging frying pan in the paws of Booger Bill. The others were fighting desperately. One was trying to get away. Weldon saw the man reach the doorway and throw himself outside just as a double-barreled shotgun crashed on top of the fellow's head and sent him sprawling on his face, with his skull crushed with one blow.

"Eat 'em alive, I tell yuh!" Old Booger Bill McBride was chanting wildly. "Kick 'em in the belly an' stomp on their shins, an' give 'em plenty of hell for all their sins! Never in my life but once have I used a fryin' pan, but she shore gets

action! Here, yuh whippoorwill, how do yuh like yore beefsteak cooked?" The old pan rang like a gong as McBride brought it down on another head. "Well done or just kind o' middlin'?"

Weldon was already in it. He was tangled with a burly, black-bearded man who had already lost his mask. He felt the point of a knife scrape him along the right forearm but flinched away from it, and drove a blow to the man's jaw. Then both of them were down on the floor and rolling against the table with the knife still gouging at Weldon while he tried to push away the wrist of the hand holding it.

"Here, let me at it!" Somebody had suddenly struck a match. In the glare of it old Booger Bill McBride had suddenly appeared over Weldon and the man he was fighting. "I'm throwin' pistols away an' carryin' fryin' pans from now on."

But Weldon was a little quicker. He smashed a fist straight to the throat of the man he was fighting. The man grunted as if all the breath had suddenly left him. Weldon struck again, and his opponent was suddenly limp. Weldon struck the third and fourth blow, and then staggered up just as the old cast-iron frying pan swung past him and spatted the downed man in the face.

"That'll do, Booger!" Weldon caught McBride and threw him back just as he was about to deliver a second blow from the pan. "We want somebody left alive in this thing!"

"Why?" Booger Bill straightened and looked at him with bitter disgust. "A rattlesnake's better dead than alive, Utah. Yuh ain't gettin' softenin' of the brain, are yuh, just 'cause Jawn's purty Zell's been smilin' at yuh tonight?"

Weldon turned quickly away from him. John Martin had already lighted another lamp which showed the room in wreckage. Chairs were smashed, broken dishware spilled everywhere among the streaks of blood and dead and unconscious men on the floor.

"Purty work, boys!" An ancient ghost in ragged buckskins came through the door with a muzzle-loader shotgun in his hands—a tall, lean old man with a matted gray beard, twinkling blue eyes, and snags of tobacco-stained teeth glinting in the lamplight. "I sort o' thought yuh boys would do a good job."

"Squawman York!" Martin hurried across the room and caught the man by the hand. "Yuh old wolf trapper! Yuh old squawman! How'd yuh get here?"

"Rid a hoss!" The newcomer chuckled. "Hell's bells, Jawn, yuh didn't think I sprouted wings an' flew, didja? Lis'en!" He held up a dirty talon of a hand. "Hear that! The boys are comin' in fast."

"What boys?" Martin cocked his head to one side as the low, rolling beat of hoofs sounded to northward as if a troop of cavalry was making a charge. "Sounds like somebody goin' to war."

"Yes, an' no," the old trapper nodded. "It's yore boys from the north side of the range. I sent 'em word. Hell's sure popped, ain't it? Was all set for the big blow-up tomorrow. Well, bust my britches with a crosscut saw!" He had glanced across the room to Jasper Barker. "If it ain't the devil 'imse'f! Howdy, Jasper! Whatnahell yuh doin' over there in the corner?"

"Mindin' my own business." Jasper Barker's voice was a sad bleat, and he was bent over struggling and

pulling at something. A long, white pair of fat arms appeared. Then came the struggling Yardletta Little with the other women behind her, pushing.

"Looks like yo're tryin' to skin a mule by the ears." York grinned. "Are yuh still workin' for the insurance companies, you old tin peddler?"

CHAPTER XI

THE MASK UNMASKED

WELDON left them and went outside. He headed straight for the trees and the dead man under them. Certain of what he was about to see, he rolled the dead man over and took out a match to strike it.

"And now, Dr. C. Doom, we'll find out how you're getting along." He squatted beside the man and ripped off the mask as he struck his match. "The moment I looked at you I knew you were the buzzard—"

His voice came to an abrupt halt. Not Dr. C. Doom, but some well dressed man Weldon had never seen before lay dead on the ground. He stood up, a puzzled frown crossing his face as he looked toward Rattleweed and saw that most of the light against the sky in that direction had died away to a mere glowing. As he turned back toward the house, a tall ghost of a shadow came out of the shadows.

"Good evening, Mr. Weldon. It's twice we meet in one night."

"You!" Weldon's voice was akin to a gasp. *"Dr. Doom!"*

"That's right, my friend," the doctor laughed. "I came with the old wolf hunter. The two of us bluffed that gang in the dining room."

"But—"

"No need of saying it." Doom held up his hand as a gang of John Martin's cowboys came around the corner of the house, marching four bound men along with them. "You thought this body was mine. I heard you. No hard feelings!" He held up his hand again. "You and McBride happened in at the right time. For two years I've been making people suspect me. We were fighting a terrible thing here. First, it was an insurance racket imported from back East. Men killed, and insurance collected on them. With a commissioner to verify the deaths, and a postmaster in on the deal, it was very simple. The man at your feet is Banker Dalton, a very respected citizen of Rattleweed. He engineered the business, but enough was not enough. They finally decided to take over the canyon. At daylight it was set for explosions to go off at Jumpoff. They won't go off. The scheme has been nipped in the bud. Crooks from one end of the canyon to the other are being either jailed or killed. The entire canyon is up in arms at last.

"Your friend, Barker, was a great fellow." He laughed softly. "With his tin peddling. He's an ace man for the insurance companies, but no one ever suspects him of having any more sense than the Snorky hog he carries around with him. He worked the south end of the canyon until he had everything cinched there, and then he came on here for the showdown. The government stepped in and you men came. Leighton was in a bad way, poor fellow. I hope he doesn't take it too much to heart."

"Yuh had better go in the kitchen, Utah." Jedd North had come up to them with Snorky grunting at his heels. "Booger Bill an' Jasper Barker are in a row over Miss Little. They'll be fightin' any minute."

Weldon and the doctor turned and hurried away. The house was filled with men by this time. Four men stood in front of the fireplace in the living room with their hands behind them and guards watching them. Others were being brought in from the dining room. It was all very much of a mess.

"So yuh birds thought yuh'd dam up the whole canyon an' make it into a power project, huh?" John Martin was walking the floor in a rage. Gabriel Leighton stood in the corner with his arm around his wife. "But yuh didn't get away with it!"

IT was all a little too much for Utah Dave Weldon. He heard old Booger Bill McBride arguing in the dining room. Now and then he heard Elizabeth Martin say something. He walked on. McBride and Barker were bellied up to each other and the both of them were sneering in each other's faces.

"She ain't to be skinned up!" McBride was saying. "Just 'cause a woman's got to be he'ped outta a hole ain't no sign yuh oughta skin her wrists."

"Dammit"—Jasper Barker took a step backward and hurled his hat on the floor—"don't a cow usually get sort o' skinned a mite when yuh pull 'em outta a bog hole?"

"She ain't no cow!" McBride started to strike the man with his fist. Weldon stepped in just to keep them from flying at each other. "I'll bust—"

"Quit it!" Weldon clamped his hand over McBride's mouth. "You'll bust nothing, you fool!"

"You leave Mr. McBride alone!" Yardletta Little's voice came in a weak gasp. "Bill . . . Bill's a nice man. He . . . he's only trying to protect a lady, aren't you, William?"

"Leave them alone." Zell Martin caught Weldon by the arm and pulled him toward the rear doorway. "They won't fight. Mother will see to that. See her standing there with a frying pan in her hand? Booger Bill will never start anything with mother over him with the pan. Besides"—she looked up and smiled—"it's only Barker's way of trying to make Booger strong with a new girl friend. Barker always tries to help everything along."

"If that's the case"—Weldon looked down at her quickly—"I'm going back and get Barker to help me."

"With . . . Yardletta!" Her eyes widened.

"No, with you!" he said bluntly, barely conscious of the noise and arguing going on behind them. "Now that Booger Bill has taken to higher education, I'd like to settle down here and get myself acquainted with you. Something tells me I'm going to like this place."

"There's a job waiting here for you." She laughed as his hand tightened on her arm. "Something tells me it's going to be nice having you around the ranch."

They walked on to the rim of the cliffs. More and more men could be heard galloping up in front of the house. All Thunder River Canyon seemed on the move tonight. Talk ran wildly in the living room as each new group of men arrived, but Weldon scarcely heard it. He was not even interested. He was trying hard and fast to get acquainted with a girl, and something told him he was making plenty of headway.

THE END.

THE RANCHER'S DILEMMA

By GLENN H. WICHMAN

My partner, Hep Gallegher, is greatly given to doing strange and loco things; so when me and the boss, Jim Donnelly, found him shouting at himself in loud tones we weren't too much surprised. Jim and me were riding the Triangle C fence that ran along the Greenville road when we spotted Hep. We came up and stood in the brush within twenty feet of him, but he didn't hear us, having what passed for his mind on something else.

Gallegher had dismounted and was standing in a little cleared space beside the road. He stood with his right foot thrust forward, his chest swole out and his right hand resting over his heart.

"Sir," he roared at the top of his voice, and he had a large voice, too, "I'd rather see my daughter dead than married to a whelp like you!"

This seemed an odd sort of thing for him to be in a lather over. He didn't have a daughter, in the first place, not even being married. And if he had had a daughter, she couldn't possibly have been old enough to be thinking of getting married.

Hep thrust his right foot out still farther. "Begone!" he yelled. "Begone! Never darken the portals of these doors again!"

"What doors?" whispered Jim Donnelly. "I don't see any doors. What in the world's the guy so excited about?"

"Something seems to be bothering him," I said. "He looks sober enough. It must be a new idea that's got him. Listen."

"Woe is me!" Gallegher shouted. "Woe! Woe! Woe! My kingdom for a horse!"

"Horse" Donnelly muttered. "What's he think is standing ten feet from him, a camel? George, your partner's gone loco."

It looks pretty much like it, at that.

Hep took his right hand off his heart and held it up high in the air.

"A curse on you, Squire Hardcastle!" he shouted. "Curses on you and all your relations! Curses on you! May worms eat you as you molder in your grave!"

A light dawned inside my dome. Gallegher thought he was an actor! That was what was the matter with him.

"'Tis a cold night without, my lord!" Gallegher continued. "Without what, my lord? Without a shirt, my lord!"

This was too much for Jim Donnelly. He pulled his .45 and let a slug fly up into the air. It about scared Gallegher to death. He went for his own iron, thinkin' that he'd been shot. "Easy!" I yelled, and jumped out into the clear. "Calm down, you fathead! It's just me an' Jim Donnelly watchin' you!"

Gallegher was pretty sore but not at all ashamed of himself at having been overheard.

"It's a pity," he growled, "that you birds ain't got any manners."

"Is it something that you've been eatin'," asked Donnelly.

"Nothing of the kind!" Gallegher said indignantly. "I've been practicin' my lesson in action'. A man's got a right to practice, ain't he, without bein' shot at!"

"I'm not so sure," answered Jim. "Don't you ever let me catch you at it again."

It looked as though a fight was comin', and I ought to do something to smooth things over.

"Shucks, Hep," said I, "what've you been up to, anyway? Mebbe if you was to explain it to Jim."

This did the trick, because Hep was always glad to talk about his new ideas.

"This mornin'," he explained, "I took my first lesson in play actin'. In Greenville. From the famous Mr. Chauncey Gillingwater who—"

"Chauncey what?" I interrupted.

"If you weren't so thick in the noggin," Hep said in a superior tone, "you'd know that Mr. Chauncey Gillingwater is the greatest actor in the world."

This seemed to take in a lot of ground. Hep continued to explain. It seemed that he had met the great Gillingwater in a saloon at Greenville. Gillingwater had come to town to organize a drama and put it on in the town hall so as to make a satchelful of money. He had been looking for folks to act in it, but without much luck until he ran across Hep. Hep, who would fall for anything, especially anything foolish, had agreed to be an actor and to get other folks to be actors too.

"Gillingwater says I've got a fine voice for it," Gallegher told us proudly. "And a great physique. He's sure I've missed my callin'. I should have been an actor instead of a cowhand. It's too darn bad I'm gettin' such a late start at it."

This didn't sound so good. The year before a traveling troupe had come to Greenville and put on a play in the town hall. It was so awful that some gents in the audience got eggs and vegetables and some other odds and ends of merchandise and pelted the actors with 'em. Which led to a big fight and a lot of busted noses. If something like that could happen to regular actors what in the world would Greenville do to Hep and any other lame brains who thought they could act?

"You're a lunatic for having anything to do with a stunt like that," I told Hep. "You'll be lucky if you end up all in one piece."

BUT Hep wasn't listening. He was watching a buckboard that was coming up the road from the direction of town.

"That's Chauncey Gillingwater now," he said excitedly. "The poor guy's about bankrupt so I invited him out to the ranch. I offered to hire him a horse to ride but he was afraid he'd fall off it. So I rented him a buckboard."

"Huh!" the boss grunted. "So I'm goin' to have an actor ridin' my grub line. If he runs off with the knives and forks, Gallegher, I'll bust you on the head."

"Gallegher sighed and looked at us with a pained expression. "It's too bad you bums ain't got any appreciation for the higher things of life. All you can think about is something to eat and knives and forks. It's a pity you don't know greatness when you see it."

He watched Gillingwater drive up and climb down off the buckboard seat. He was an oldish sort of a fellow, tall and thin, with a long face and sunken cheeks. He reminded me somewhat of an old horse I'd once known. Mr. Gillingwater's flowing coat had been black when new but the sun had turned it into a bottle green. He wore a high plug hat that had a lot of raveled threads hanging from it and a wing collar that had one wing missing. Undoubtedly he had seen better days, but not very recently.

"Gentlemen! Gentlemen!" Chauncey Gillingwater boomed in a deep voice. "I take it you're Hep's friends, which makes me proud to meet you. It is indeed a pleasure. It warms my heart!"

He pumped our hands up and down as Gallegher told him our names.

The introducing over, Gillingwater bowed to Hep. "Full many a

flower," he said to Hep, "was born to blush unseen, and waste its fragrance on the desert air. But not you, Mr. Gallegher. I have found you. Your talents will no longer be hidden under a bushel or your fragrance wasted."

Hep looked kind of blank.

"Back in my country," the boss put in, "them would have been fightin' words. I take it, Mr. Gillingwater, you're intimatin' that Gallegher smells like a burro. You're wrong. He's the bathingest guy in these parts."

Mr. Gillingwater's long face grew even longer. "My friends," he said sorrowfully, "you completely misunderstand my poetic illusion. In one syllable words, what I meant was that Gallegher is going to be a great success on the boards, meaning the stage."

"Why, of course," Hep chimed in, while me and the boss laughed.

Chauncey sighed and there was a twinkle in his eye, which showed that he probably didn't even believe his spiel himself.

Jim Donnelly looked at his watch. "Eatin' time," he announced. "We'd all better hightail it for a nose bag. Gillingwater, the Triangle C'll be pleased to have you for a guest."

"True Western hospitality," the actor replied happily as he climbed hurriedly back up on the buckboard seat. "I could certainly stand some food. Thank you, Mr. Donnelly. Thank you." Then he clucked at the livery-stable horses and away he went up the road toward the Triangle C.

GILLINGWATER put away enough beans and pork to have kept three orphans going for a month. By way of payment he recited with appropriate gestures, a long poem about a Hindu gent named Gunga Din. Poor Gunga was always being kicked in the seat of the pants. This was about all I could understand of it because Chauncey recited so loud that he nearly blew the shingles off the cock-shack roof.

"If I was you," I advised him, "I'd forget about puttin' on a drama in the town hall. It could lead only to a riot. I'm—"

"Ah, dry up!" Hep interrupted. "What do you know about the drama!"

"Well, don't say you two weren't warned," said the boss.

Chauncey Gillingwater looked a bit worried, but he stuck to his guns. "I think you gentlemen are wrong," he told us. "I'm sure folks will appreciate the play I have written, 'The Rancher's Dilemma or More Wronged Than Usual.'" He said it just as though that settled the matter for good and forever.

About this time the grub began to work on Chauncey, making him sleepy. So the rest of us returned to the beefsteak business while he snored away the afternoon in the shade of the cook shack.

"I don't think," I said to Hep, "that Mr. Gillingwater is such a feeble-minded gent as he pretends to be. I think he's got something more up the sleeve of his coat than his arm. How much are you paying for your lessons?"

"Nothing," replied Hep.

"Which makes it that much worse," I told him. "Nobody but you does things for nothing and you're an idiot, so it don't count."

That evening Gillingwater entertained us with funny stories and he could sing pretty well in addition, so Jim Donnelly began to like him. Jim even gave Hep a week off and offered to do what he could to help along the play.

"It might be a good thing at that," he declared, "for Greenville to get its mind off of being mean and ornery. That's a tough burg. Mebbe an excursion into the higher things of life would tame it down."

"Bravo!" Gillingwater exclaimed. "Donnelly, I knew you were an unusual man. Perhaps you'll even accept a leading part in the play?"

Jim Donnelly wasn't so sure, but he said he'd think about it.

"Perhaps even you, George," Chauncey said to me, "will take a part in the play?"

"Sure he will," Hep chimed in.

"Of course he will," said Jim Donnelly. Which was how I got myself elected a lot of trouble.

Next day the four of us went into Greenville. Chauncey Gillingwater hinted that a little lubrication might be good for our systems so we ambled into the Pitchfork Saloon. There we ran across Mike Hudkins, the town blacksmith. Mike was a tremendously large gent and generally as mean as the devil.

"What's this hogwash about Brenda Axe bein' in a play?" Mike demanded loudly.

Gillingwater seemed to know the blacksmith. "Calm yourself, Mr. Hudkins," Chauncey urged. "Miss Axe has kindly consented, after a lot of persuading by Hep Gallegher, to be our leading lady. Surely you could have no objection to that?"

Hudkins pounded the bar with his sledge-hammer fist. "I don't know much about plays," he admitted, "but if Brenda gets insulted in this play actin' the whole kit and caboodle of yuh have got me to fight!"

"Ah, forget it, Mike," Donnelly said soothingly. "Have a drink and keep your shirt on for a change."

Mike calmed down and had the drink. "They tell me," he continued, "that that skinny rascal Willie Peeler is goin' to be the chief actor."

"Yes," Chauncey admitted. "Mr. Peeler has kindly consented to play the male lead. We have Hep to thank for Willie and Brenda being in the cast. He prevailed upon them after a lot of urging."

Mike Hudkins glowered at Hep. "Well then," he said, "if anything happens to Brenda I'll know who to take the first swing at."

A storm seemed to be gathering. Brenda Axe was a good-looking girl who had recently inherited the Box R from her Uncle Dan and had come to dwell in our midst. She was very pleasant and full of smiles, and a lot of gents including Mike Hudkins and Willie Peeler had made love to her, but without any noticeable success. Willie Peeler ran a saddle-and-harness shop and while he was a nice enough guy he wasn't any match for Mike.

After we'd taken on quite a cargo of bourbon we went down to Willie's saddle shop. Willie dropped a stitch in the leather he was sewing.

"Gosh all fishhooks," he groaned. "This play-actin' idea makes me all nervous. Do you really think I'll make a good hero, Mr. Gillingwater?"

"Absolutely," Chauncey assured him. "I had a man just like you in mind when I wrote the hero's part. We start rehearsing this afternoon. Come to the town hall at two o'clock."

I noticed that we were creating quite a lot of attention in Greenville. Folks followed us around like we were a herd of two-headed calves. The general opinion was that we were completely out of our heads.

"Some day," Gallegher said, when I pointed out the effect we were producing, "I'll be famous. I'm to be the villain in this particular play,

but hereafter I'll be the hero. I'll probably make a million dollars."

AT two o'clock we all met at the town hall while folks who thought they were funny gaped at us through the windows. Brenda Axe came, looking cool and pretty in a blue dress. Willie Peeler blushed at sight of her and got all flustered up and stumbled over his own feet.

Chauncey Gillingwater pulled down the windows and shut the doors and explained the play.

"'The Rancher's Dilemma or More Wronged Than Usual,'" he began, "is the story of an unfortunate rancher. There are six characters. George," he informed me, "you are the unfortunate rancher. Miss Brenda, you are the rancher's pure and innocent and very beautiful daughter. Gallegher, you are a wicked banker. Willie Peeler, you are a poor but honest cowhand in love with Brenda. Mr. Donnelly, you are the ranch foreman. You would like to press your suit with Brenda, but you realize it is hopeless. I, Chauncey Gillingwater, am a humorous cowboy who is full of wheezes and funny sayings.

"Now for the story. George, the rancher, is in a fix. The banker, Hep, is about to foreclose on his spread. George's prize bull, worth a lot of money, has been run off with. Money he has hidden has been stolen. His cattle are being rustled. His fences have been cut. His springs have been dynamited. All he has left is his beautiful daughter, Brenda. The only solution he can see for his difficulties is to marry Brenda off to the skinflint banker, Hep."

"All these misfortunates," I said "are too much for me. I've got to have a drink."

"I'm with you," the boss chimed in. "Seeing that I can't press my suit with Brenda I've gotta have a drink, too."

"Fine guys you are!" Hep said angrily.

Nevertheless me and Jim Donnelly went over to the Pitchfork and took on a couple more. This gave us courage, so we decided to take another twirl at acting and went back to the town hall. The play didn't seem to make an awful lot of sense or mebbe it was us. Gillingwater had some of it written down, but most of it was in his head. Apparently it was a sad story. Brenda wanted to save me, her father, from bankruptcy by marrying Hep. Willie Peeler didn't like this, of course, and got sarcastic about it. He had a few hard and uncomplimentary things to say about the poor girl. It appeared he had the notion that true love was everything and that money and beef critters didn't count. And besides it seemed that Brenda had once promised to marry him while they were sitting on the corral fence and he was inclined to hold her to her bargain.

About this time me and Donnelly got discouraged again and went back to the Pitchfork. In about an hour Hep and Chauncey joined us. Chauncey had, likewise, developed a thirst.

"Too much rehearsing will not be necessary," Gillingwater said. "You are all natural actors and I don't want to destroy your pristine freshness. If you understand what I mean."

None of us did, but we let him get away with it.

"But tomorrow," Chauncey continued, "we must really get down to business."

Next day we learned how the play turned out. It seemed that Willie Peeler saved Brenda from Hep just

in the nick of time by proving that Hep had stole the money and the bull and had dynamited the springs.

"Shucks!" Hep complained. "Do you think folks will like me around here after I've done all those low-down things?"

"If they should hang you," I told him bitterly, "it'd serve you right."

"What nonsense," Chauncey scoffed. "This is just a play."

Willie Peeler was now getting over some of his bashfulness and he didn't seem to be as scared of Brenda as he had been at the beginning. Those two and Hep were the only ones of us who were at least partially enjoying the foolishness.

Me and Hep came upon Mike Hudkins and Brenda just as they met in front of the general store. Mike had been going around town vowing that if anything should happen to Miss Brenda in "The Rancher's Dilemma" he'd fight the whole damn county at one and the same time.

"Ma'am," Mike said earnestly, "I'm a great defender of womankind. Nothin' would make me fight quicker than for some bum to have unkind things to say about a lady."

"Why, Mike!" Brenda exclaimed. "I can't imagine what you're talking about."

MIKE HUDKINS was kind of heavy in the head. "Ma'am," he repeated, "any woman who would marry me would never be annoyed by nobody." He doubled up his arm muscles until they about busted his shirt. "Ma'am, I could sock a guy into next week."

Brenda Axe blushed a little. "That is certainly interesting, Mr. Hudkins," she said, and then went into the general store, leaving the blacksmith standing outside with his mouth open.

Mike Hudkins glowered at me and Hep and then went over to the Pitchfork.

"Mike," I warned Hep, "never has more than one idea at a time and it's always a bad one."

That afternoon we happened upon Willie Peeler and Brenda while they were rehearsing their part in the hall. They didn't hear us, so we just stood there and watched 'em.

"Relax, Willie," Brenda was urging. "Just be natural."

"Doggone it," murmured Willie, "I don't seem to get the hang of it."

"You must stand closer to me," Brenda told him. "Don't act as though I was a lion or something and might eat you."

"Doggone it," Willie repeated.

Then they saw me and Hep standing there, so they decided they'd had enough rehearsing and went outside to get a drink of water.

Chauncey Gillingwater was busy as a flea getting the scenery together and one thing and another. He painted a lot of signs and tacked 'em around town. The play was to be on Saturday night. Admission was four bits. The news must have spread a long way, because as early as Saturday morning gents from quite a distance began drifting into Greenville.

"I was hopin'," Jim Donnelly said as he leaned on the Pitchfork counter, "that nobody'd come."

"Mebbe we'd better run before it's too late," I suggested.

"It's a penitentiary offense," Chauncey informed us, "for actors to desert a play. We'll have another little snifter, which'll cheer us up."

We were cheered up. The town got noisier and noisier. Me and Jim had some idea of setting fire to the place but nothing came of it. Much to our disheartenment night finally descended and we were in for it.

Ladies and gents began arriving at the town hall before seven o'clock and by eight o'clock the place was packed like a can of sardines.

Chauncey had collected the admissions at the door. He fairly bulged with four-bit pieces when he came around outside and in the back door to the stage. Folks in the audience were hollering for the curtain to go up and stamping their feet.

"It's got the sound," I groaned, "of an approaching stampede. I still think we oughta run."

"Coward," Hep growled. "This is the night of my triumph."

"It's the beginning of a great career," Chauncey Gillingwater said, and for the first time I noticed that even he was a little nervous.

"We must all be brave," Brenda Axe told us.

"Of course," Willie agreed, looking as white as a bed sheet.

The evil hour couldn't be put off any longer. If Chauncey hadn't pulled up the curtain right when he did the audience would have pulled it up for him.

ME and Hep and Jim Donnelly were on the stage when the curtain went up. Folks who knew us out in the audience started hollering at us. And those who didn't know us hollered at those who hollered. Gallegher got started off with his lines but nobody could hear him, not even me. Chauncey had to come out and hold up his arms and after a while the folks gentled down.

The opening scene was where Gallegher, the banker, came out to my ranch to tell me and my foreman, Jim Donnelly, how sorry he was for us that everything had gone haywire and that he would have to foreclose the mortgage.

"Shoot the banker!" somebody in the rear of the hall shouted.

This nearly led to a riot, but some peaceably inclined folks tossed the disturber out the door and that settled him. We started off again. The only trouble now was that Hep forgot some of his lines and I forgot quite a few and Jim Donnelly forgot all of his.

"Just keep right on going," Chauncey Gilingwater whispered hoarsely from one side of the stage. "Make up what you can't remember."

This didn't work out so well, so to fill in the gap Chauncey himself came out ahead of time and sang some songs and told jokes.

The first act ended with Willie Peeler and Brenda Axe coming on, hand in hand. The girl said that she would save me and the ranch from being gobbled up by the greedy banker even if it was the last thing she did on earth. This made quite a hit with the audience. They about yelled their heads off. They cheered Brenda and gave Hep the bird.

Just then a large cabbage came flying through the air and hit Gallegher in the stomach. The cabbage was followed by a collection of potatoes. One of the spuds hit the boss in the eye. Chauncey made a grab for the curtain and if he hadn't lowered it there's no telling what might have happened.

"Our play's got off to a nice start," Chauncey Gillingwater chuckled. "It is going to be a great success and we'll be talked about for the next forty years."

"The next guy who hits me with a potato," Jim Donnelly announced darkly, "is going to get himself killed."

"I can see," Hep complained, "that my popularity ain't increasin' none. I wish I was a hero, like Willie."

But Willie, even if he was a hero,

seemed to wish that he were somewhere else.

The second act got started. In this Willie discovered what Brenda had meant when she said she was going to save her poor papa and the ranch. He hadn't imagined that she was going to leave him colder than an old pancake and marry the greedy banker. This was the only part of the drama that Chauncey seemed to have really given a lot of attention to.

Brenda and Willie got started off with their actin', while the rest of us stood around the border of the stage and watched 'em. They were supposed to be in the ranch yard. It went as follows and to wit:

Willie: Right nice of you, gal, to save your paw and the ranch. Right nice of you, I reckon. I'm tolerable proud of you, gal.

Brenda: Oh, my dear! It's nice of you to say so. So nice and generous.

Willie: Generous, gal! What do you mean?

Brenda: You haven't asked me how I'm going to save poor pa.

Willie: Well, all right then. I'll ask you.

Brenda: Oh, Willie, Willie! I'm going to marry the banker. Then he'll tear up the mortgage.

Willie: (thunderstruck) Why, gal! You can't do that!

Brenda: Why can't I?

Willie: Because you promised to marry me day before yesterday.

Brenda: Alas! I am going to marry the banker.

Willie: Alas, my eye! No gal can give me the runaround like that!

Brenda: (weeping softly) I'm determined to save our spread.

Willie: (with clenched fists) Gal, you're a heartless filly! You're not the pure gold I thought you! You're fool's gold! That's what you are!

Well, Willie never got any further with his speech because at that precise instant Mike Hudkins hoisted himself up in the audience.

"You scoundrel!" Mike roared at Willie. "Talkin' to a lady like that! Am I the only man here? I'll thrash the whole damn audience for listenin' to a lady bein' insulted!"

LIKE a large hurricane, Mike Hudkins was already on his way to the stage. But just a moment before Mike could reach the stage Brenda did two unusual things. First she kissed Willie Peeler very thoroughly. Secondly she grabbed a chair. I guess I was the only one who noticed that just as Mike reached the stage Chauncey Gillingwater went out the back door.

"I'll show you, Brenda," Hudkins roared, "that there's one man who'll defend a woman's good name in these parts!"

The big gent obviously was out of his head. From then on it was impossible to keep track of anything that went on. The air was full of dust and noise. The more timid people were going out through the windows like water out of a hose. The town hall was shaking as though there was an earthquake. Me and Hep and Jim Donnelly tried to come to Willie's assistance. We didn't make out so good.

Hep collected one of Mike Hudkins' fists on his chin. Jim Donnelly got the other one. I took a swing and fell over Jim. Willie Peeler got in a punch, but it didn't do any good. It was Brenda who saved the day. She brought the chair down on Mike's thick head.

"Don't you touch my husband!" Brenda screamed.

The noise in the hall now wasn't quite as bad. A lot of people heard Brenda.

Mike Hudkins rubbed his chin and blinked.

"Husband!" he gasped thickly. "Whose husband?"

Brenda grabbed up another chair. "Willie and I were married by the parson this evening. When we started rehearsing we discovered how much we liked each other. We were going to announce the wedding after the show, and invite you all to a reception—"

It was interesting to see Mike's brain begin to work. He looked around. His fists clenched. "Where's Gillingwater?" he shouted.

"He stole a horse an' rode away!" yelled someone in the back.

"With a hundred dollars of mine!" Hudkins rasped. "If it hadn't been for Gallegher—" He took a swing at Hep and then rushed out the back door.

Where Gillingwater made his big mistake was in trying to get away on a horse. He fell off it before he got out of town. Hudkins brought him back and not only shook the hundred dollars out of him but the admission money as well.

"I'm kind o' sorry, ma'am," Mike told the bride. "Chauncey told me there was a sure way for me to make you like me. What happened tonight was supposed to be it. Me defendin' you after you'd been spoke ill of. Thunderation! There musta been somethin' the matter with it."

"All is forgiven," Brenda said magnanimously. "Willie and I are very happy, but if it hadn't been for the play—and Hep urging us to take the parts—"

Mike Hudkins forgot that he had calmed down. He started in on Hep and Gillingwater all over again, but a lot of gents pounced on him and carried him bodily over to the Pitchfork where they made him buy a barrel of beer for the reception to the newlyweds.

The reception was better than the play could ever have been. Gillingwater recited poetry and begged everybody's pardon. Mike went to sleep under a table. The bride and groom departed on their honeymoon. Along in the early morning me and Hep and Jim Donnelly got back to the Triangle C.

"The great actor!" snorted Jim.

"Ah, shut up!" Hep groaned. "I got a headache. Hereafter I'm dedicatin' my life to supplyin' the world with beefsteaks."

"If you stay with that notion for one short month," the boss told him, "I'll raise your pay."

But Hep didn't get the raise.

THE END.

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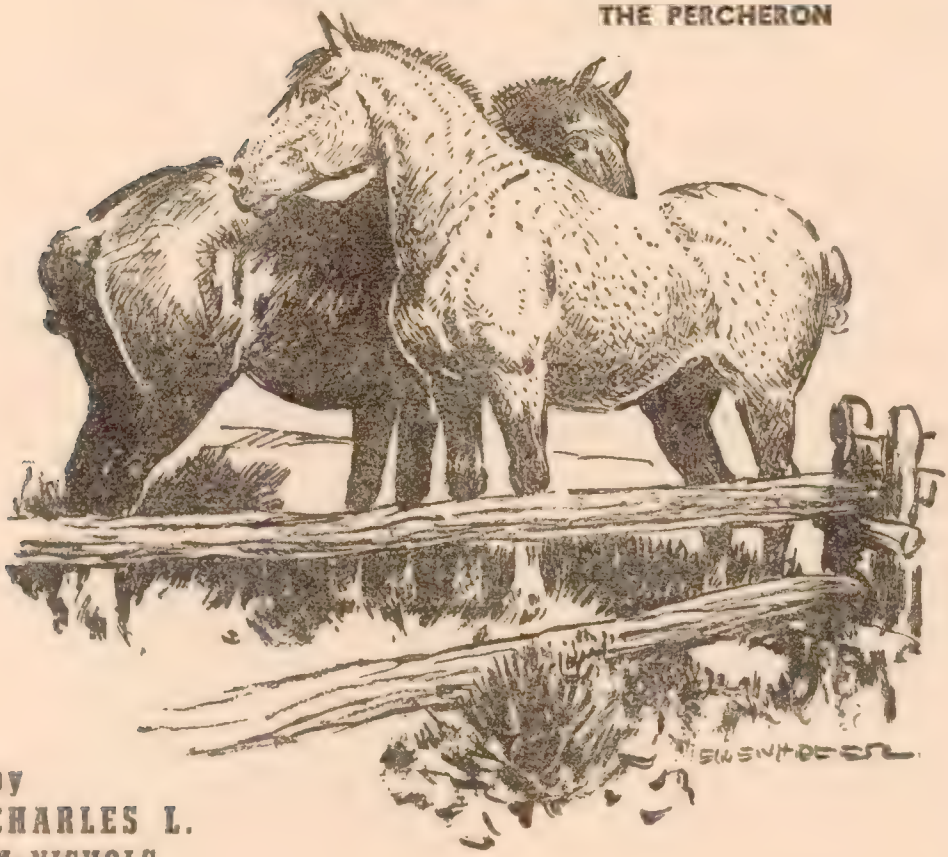
COW HORSES

THE PERCHERON



by
CHARLES L.
McNICHOLS

YES, we know the Percheron is a truck horse and has an average weight of about a ton, but nevertheless there was a time when a lot of otherwise sensible cowmen imported a whole raft of Percherons to the Rocky Mountain region. While they didn't expect to use the elephant-sized animals for working cattle—although it has been done!—they did expect to make cow horses out of their immediate sons and daughters.

When the first range cattle were brought up from Texas into the mountain and plateau region that extends through Colorado and Wyoming into Montana and Idaho, the cowhands who brought them found that their native Texas horses were too small for mountain work. Furthermore, the Texas horses were few in number and the ranch remuda had to be enlarged by the addition of Indian mustangs that were even smaller. To make matters worse, the lean Texas hands tended to drift back to their home range after a season or two, and their jobs were taken over by farm boys from the prairie States. These Northerners were on the average quite a bit heavier.

What with cow ponies getting lighter and cowboys getting heavier

and the cattle being worked up into steeper and rougher range all the time, the ranchers were having a hard time keeping their riders in mounts. They wore down horses so fast each man had to have too large a string for convenience. As one old hand put it, "The working remuda on a roundup was almost as big as the cow herd."

Obviously, what was needed was bigger horses. Along in the late '80s somebody got the bright idea that the way to get bigger horses was to cross draft-horse sires with mustang mares. Just who this master mind was, nobody seems to remember. Everybody seems to have been very anxious to forget the whole thing as soon as possible. Before the originator had the opportunity to try out his novel experiment in stock-horse breeding, his neighbors got wind of it and, fearing that he would beat them to something good, they all sent East for Percheron stallions. In a single season the rage spread all through the Rocky Mountain region, into the Dakotas, and, to a lesser extent, into Utah and the Sierra region in California.

History does not record why Percherons were picked over other draft-horse types to be the progenitor of this new race of cow horses. But the choice is fairly obvious because the Percheron is probably the most active of all horses its size. He comes from the Perche district in France, and originated from a type of cavalry horse used in the Middle Ages, when both man and mount went into battle clanking like a busy blacksmith shop with uniform and equipment made of boiler plate.

Also, the Percheron carries a considerable cross of Arab blood. He stands up under heat very well. Percherons have been supplanting mules for hauling and field work down on the great King Land & Cattle Co.'s ranches in south Texas. Likewise, the Percheron can move very fast once he gets started. At the Los Angeles county fair they have a race—the Ten Ton Derby—for a field of Percherons! And a popular race it is, too.

While the Percherons obviously are not cow horses, there are others that are worse. In Oregon some misguided persons tried breeding Clydesdales—they are the big boys with long, bushy fetlocks and hoofs as big as ten-quart buckets—to range mares. Instead of cow horses, what they got was a monstrosity that became known as the "Oregon Lummox."

WELL, the boys in the mountain States sat around and waited for their half-breed Percherons to appear and develop into the wonder horses of the age. There was some disappointment from the start because some of the colts didn't seem to take on size as rapidly as they should. But others were almost as big as their mothers when they were weanlings. The bigger they grew, the more pride they furnished their owners.

Those that had real big colts moved them up close to headquarters and fed them on hay and grain and kept open house for all visiting admirers. The unfortunates with small colts ran them out on the range and pretended they were lost. Altogether, it was a very exciting year, and a lot of ranch work got neglected.

By the time they were two years old some of the colts were big, tall, weedy imitations of their fathers, and there were all kinds of intermediate mixtures. Sad indeed were the reports of the bronc twisters who broke them to saddle. Some of the

biggest of these colts were just soft bone and flabby flesh, and could hardly stand up under the weight of an average-sized rider. They were slow on the start, slow on the turn, and possessed of less cow sense than a Mexican goat. Even when they were three or four years old they showed little better, and in some cases even less, weight-carrying ability than their mustang mothers.

The smaller colts that had been chased out into the back ranges by their disappointed owners turned out, on the whole, to be much better horses. They had more of the good cow-horse qualities of their mothers, and only the best of them survived. The more lubberly broke their necks when they tried to run downhill. Some few became good cow horses, but even they suffered from several handicaps. They couldn't stand up under bad weather, scant feed or long hours on rough trails like the mustangs or the Spanish horses.

Quite a number of these half Percherons were mean. They learned to buck with all the ferocity of any wild mustang, and their size and weight made it possible for them to deliver bone-rattling shocks to their riders every time their big feet hit the ground. Even those that didn't buck would jolt a man's teeth loose in a half day's travel. One boy remarked, "I rode old Puddin'foot (one of these Percheron misfits) two weeks one afternoon."

The cow-horse situation in the mountain country would have been greatly simplified if the whole generation of half-breeds had been shipped to the glue factory and their papas sent back to the plowlands where they belonged, but the cowmen had a lot of cash money tied up in that experiment at a time when cash was a rare commodity on the range. Poverty, and pride, too, made it impossible for them to give up.

EVEN at that, if they had been able or willing ruthlessly to weed out the unfit, which in this case would have been about ninety-eight percent of the stock, a new race of worth-while ranch horses, with size, bone, bottom and speed might have been produced. But it would have taken several generations of culling to stabilize the breed. For while two good Percheron-mustang breeds might produce one colt that would be a dandy, the next year they might have one that got few or no good qualities and a whole lot of bad ones from back stock. The number of individuals to be culled decreases with each generation while the percentage of good animals increases, but it's a long and expensive process.

Any such program can only be carried out by very large outfits, and the average mountain cowman just got along with his big, awkward, soft cross-breeds as best he could. The result was that the best qualities of the old mustang strain were lost in many sections of that country.

When beef prices improved in the early 1900s, real saddle stock, such as Morgans and thoroughbreds were brought into the country and their blood was added to the Percheron-mustang cross and some very fair cow horses resulted from this combination. But many horsemen believe it would have been better if they had had the original old mustang mares for the basic stock. Percherons just weren't cut out to be cow horses.

THE END.

Day after day the nineteen men plodded across the blistering sand, their packs of gold and silver a heavy load to bear under the burning desert sun.

THE STORY OF THE WEST

told in pictures and text by

GERARD DELANO

During the fall of 1828 the Indians became much more troublesome along the Santa Fe Trail. The ever-increasing number of caravans scattered the buffalo and spoiled the Indians' hunting. And in a number of unfortuate instances thoughtless and adventure-seeking whites were responsible for causing trouble by wantonly attacking the redskins.

One day a party of twenty men returning along the Trail from Santa Fe, where they had taken goods for trade, were beset by a large band of Indians who succeeded in killing one of their number in a surprise attack.

Returning that evening, the Indians swooped down, yelling and waving their robes, and attempted to stampede the stock of the whites. When this attempt failed, they piled and tied brush on a number of ponies, set fire to the brush and drove the ponies among the mules of the whites. This had the desired effect and the traders lost every mule in their possession, to the number of some thousand head.

Next morning the unfortunate band was faced with the dire necessity of proceeding on foot. Each had to carry about a thousand dollars in silver and gold dust, a heavy load to bear under the burning desert sun.

Day after day the nineteen men plodded on across the heat-shimmering sands, carefully rationing the scant supply of water in their canteens till at last the welcome banks of the Arkansas River were reached. There, among the cottonwoods, the heavy loads were carefully cached until the traders could return with wagons.

The Cimarron Route also saw more than its share of bloodshed and massacre. One summer two trappers were returning from a successful season in the mountains. Walking alongside their heavily fur-laden mules, they met with no trouble till they reached the Santa Fe Trail near Pawnee Rock. Suddenly a bunch of Pawnees burst out of the cottonwoods that fringed the river. There were over sixty of them, their shrill "Pawnee war whistles" (made from the leg bone of a turkey) wailing out fiercely.

Quickly the trappers threw up their rifles and killed two of the Indians. The Pawnees halted just long enough for the dead to be carried away, but in that brief time the trappers rushed with their mules to the top of Pawnee Rock where they took their stand determined to sell their lives dearly. On one side they were protected by the face of the rock which was an almost vertical cliff. The other three sides were rolling hills which any horse could climb. They picketed their mules where they could protect them against being stampeded and waited grimly for further attack.

The battle raged for over two days and nights while the Indians played every trick they knew. They set fire to the prairie and only a miracle saved the whites. The wind changed and the prairie fire killed two of the Pawnees instead. The Indians then tied a long row of ponies together, covered them thickly with brush and drove this strange breastworks forward, advancing on foot behind this cover. But the trappers were equal to the emergency and shot down the third and sixth horse. This stampeded them all and left the Indians suddenly without cover. Before they could recover from their surprise, a number fell to the rifles of the whites.

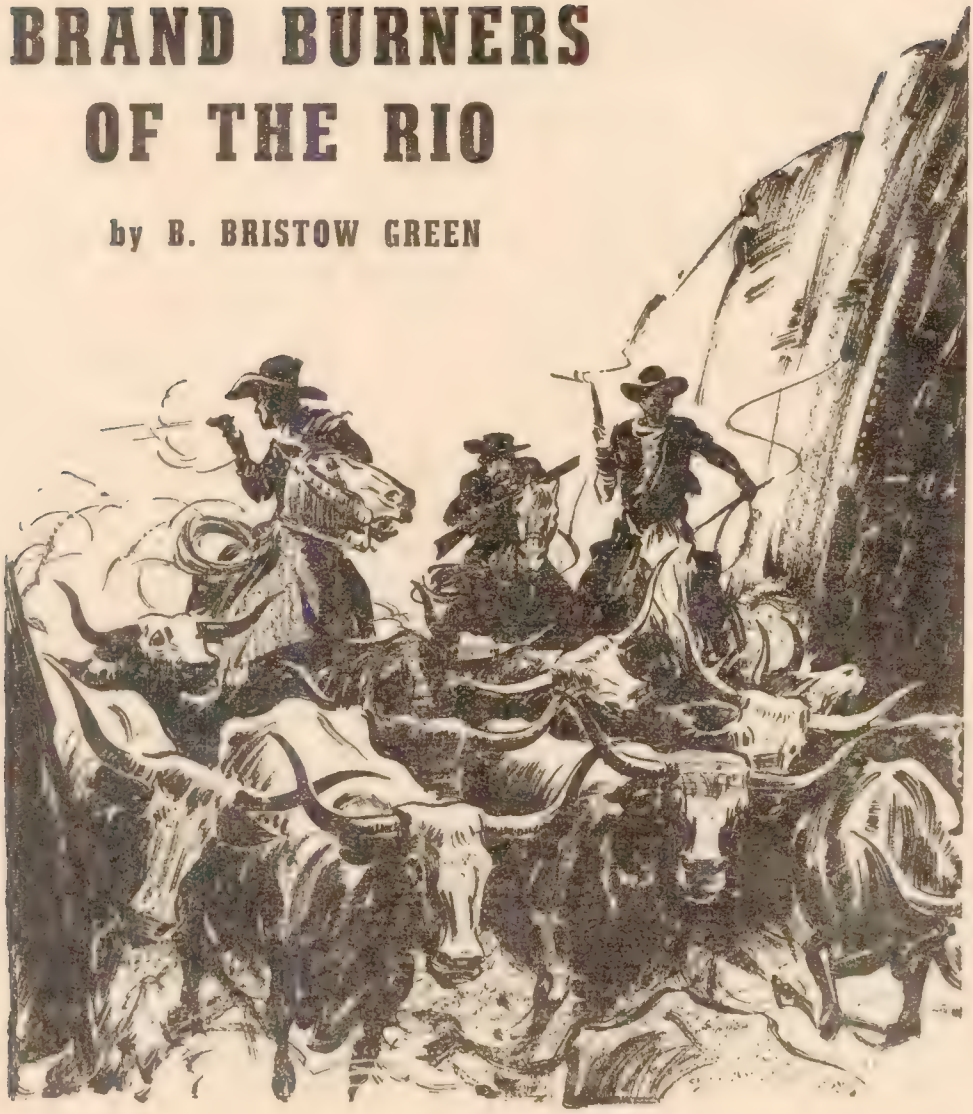
But thirst and hunger now were making both the trappers and their mules desperate. If they could hold out till another night came, perhaps they could escape through the Pawnee sentinels. It was their only chance.

As the sun was setting, a wolf call sounded from the ravine and the Pawnee sentinels guarding the rock turned and raced away. The trappers wondered what new devilment was coming next. Then they could scarcely believe their eyes, for winding down the Trail from the east came a long caravan of covered wagons. They were saved!

NEXT WEEK: A SCALPING PARTY.

BRAND BURNERS OF THE RIO

by B. BRISTOW GREEN



THIS range around Puente was a tough place to run cattle. Bronc Drennan mused as he leaned his broad back against the bar. A jackrabbit could clear the town in one jump and land smack in the Rio Grande. Run an iron on a steer and some cow thief would make it a Mexican citizen before the hair quit smoking. But they weren't stealing company beef any more, not since he'd been jiggering the JB outfit.

Six feet tall; a yard wide, Bronc Drennan was tough as rawhide. Swarthy-faced, from the Southwestern sun, with beetling black brows and a jaw like a car coupling, he had made the JB bad medicine for rustlers. But he was quitting as soon as this beef roundup was finished and the cattle on the cars. There was no fun in the job any longer.

Turning, he spread a telegraph blank on the bar and began laboriously wording the resignation he was wiring to the company headquarters.

So absorbed was he in the task that he did not notice the thump of boots on the saloon floor.

"That's shore the first sensible thing I ever knowed you to do, fellow," a voice drawled.

Drennan wheeled, quick irritation showing in his black eyes. It died as he saw the speaker. "Howdy, Madden," he grinned. "So it's you I been smellin' around here. What brings you to Puente?"

Curt Madden grinned down at him. Big as Bronc Drennan was, this blond giant with eyes as blue and bland as a spring sky, topped his six feet by three inches. He was probably the only man in this Texas cow country of equal strength. They were the best of friends, but a dozen fights had failed to convince either one that the other was the better man.

Madden ignored the question. "I see you're quittin' the JB," he said, pointing at the telegram.

"Yeah, the job's gettin' too tame."

Curt Madden shrugged. "Looks like I had my ride for nothin'. I come here just to tell you to cut your string and drift."

"Huh?" Drennan grunted.

For a moment Madden made no answer. He glanced toward the only other man at the bar. Drennan, following that glance, saw a slim, olive-skinned dandyish figure whom he recognized with a feeling of distaste. The man hadn't been there ten minutes ago and Drennan thought he must have come in with Madden. But what would Curt Madden be doing with Keensabe? The name, undoubtedly a corruption of "Quién sabe," well suited the man. Known on both sides of the river, the suave Keensabe was a question mark in the mind of every honest cattleman.

When Madden spoke it was in a lowered tone. "Bronc, did you know the Swallowfork outfit next to the JB lost two hundred head from their beef herd two nights ago?"

"Sure I know it. That bunch of Swallowfork sheepherders couldn't keep a fat hog in a pen."

Madden's face was grave. "This time they couldn't help theirselves. Listen, Bronc. That there insurrection below the line is spreadin' fast. Both sides are buyin' beef for their soldiers—more than them Mex ranchers can deliver. The rustlers are making money out of it and they've organized. They figure to clean this Puente range proper."

Bronc Drennan's eyes glinted. "They better keep off the JB. Them hands I got don't like Mex rustlers."

The seriousness in Madden's face deepened. "I rode up here, fellow, specially to tip you off. The JB's due for trouble. Outside of the Swallowfork it's the closest outfit to the river. You're gatherin' a trail herd and them hombres below the line are set to take it away from you."

How did you get wise to it?" Drennan demanded suspiciously.

"Through him." Madden jerked his head toward Keensabe. "That lad's business is to know what's goin' on."

"An' so he's crossin' up the gang he makes his money out of," Drennan said disgustedly.

"Not him. Nobody can stop this raid. That's why I figured you'd oughta know. You've made your reputation round here. Get out while things are goin' smooth. If the company starts losin' cattle soon as you're gone they'll pay double to get you back."

WITH deliberate motions, Drennan tore up the telegram he had written and threw the pieces away. "That's my answer. Tell

that Keensabe snake to get word to his friends to start their play any time. I'm sticking."

Madden caught him by the shoulder. "Listen, Bronc. I tell you—"

Drennan wrenched away. "You go plumb to hell and take that slimy cuss with you." He stalked out of the saloon angrier at Curt Madden than he had ever been before.

He flung on his horse and headed for the ranch, the violent temper in him sending him at a run. Raid the JB would they? Just let 'em try it. There'd be a bunch of greasers trompin' cinders in hell. And Curt Madden! He had heard some pretty queer tales about Madden recently. "The durn fool, hookin' up with a gang of Mex cow thieves," Drennan thought. "Didn't like to rob the outfit I'm workin' for and figured to get me off the place."

It was late afternoon when he rode into the roundup camp. His anger had turned to cold resolution. He would show Curt Madden that there weren't cow thieves enough in Mexico to take beef from an outfit he was bossing. He unsaddled his horse and turned it loose. There was a fresh one in the remuda when he wanted it.

The cook sized up Drennan's big body admiringly and forthwith sliced two extra steaks from the quarter of beef on the tailboard.

"The boys hazed a couple of Mex coyotes off the range this mornin' about sunup," he remarked.

"Yeah?" said Drennan. "Shouldn't wonder if we had a regular coyote hunt tonight. I stopped at the house and told Jake to fetch down a dozen rifles." Jake was an old-timer who did chores about the ranch, but was past doing saddle work.

"You expectin' trouble?" The cook asked with a hint of eagerness. Like the rest of the crew he was plenty salty.

"Some," Drennan replied dryly. "I'll tell it when the boys get in."

He looked off acoss the range and saw some of the men bringing in small bunches of cattle. This wasn't the regular fall roundup. They were just gathering a few hundred head to fill an unexpected order. The cattle already gathered were being held a few hundred yards from the wagon. By the time the small bunches being brought in had been thrown with the herd Jake drove up with the rifles in a light wagon.

Drennan laid the rifles on his own blankets. "All right, Jake, you can go along back to the house." He read disappointment in the old man's face and added, "Keep a shotgun loaded. You might have visitors any time." There was small chance of that, but it made the old man feel important.

Others of the crew were bringing in their gather. Presently the men came trotting in to the wagon. They saw the rifles and looked at Drennan inquiringly.

"When we've et, I'll tell you the news," he said.

As the horses were unsaddled, they shook themselves and trotted off to roll in the dust. At the cook's call, plates and cups were filled and the men squatted cross-legged in a circle. They ate with the strict attention to business of hungry men. Glancing at their lean, hard-bitten faces Bronc Drennan smiled grimly. It would be a tough bunch of rustlers that took a herd away from the JB outfit. In an amazingly short time plates were cleaned and cigarettes lighted.

Drennan told what he had heard in town, but made no mention of Curt Madden. "Maybe they don't figure to try it tonight," he said, "but

we'll be ready for 'em. The moon sets around one o'clock. If they make the play tonight it'll be around twelve; light enough to get the herd started and dark when they've crossed the river."

One of the men grinned. "With the herd close as it is, a bunch of Injuns couldn't get away with a play like that. We'd blast 'em down before they got started."

"I'm countin' on every man shootin' to kill," Drennan said grimly. He wanted to tell them that if they saw a big white man among the raiders not to kill him, but he sternly repressed the inclination. If Curt Madden was in this business, he would have to take his chances along with the other cow thieves.

Drennan called two of the men by name and gave them instructions. "You two take the first shift guardin' them cows. Don't do no sleepin' in the saddle or you're liable to wake up on the cocktail shift in hell." As the two started to get their horses, Drennan called after them. "Get this straight. If anything busts, you two stay with the herd. We don't want them cows stampeded to hell an' gone."

He saw them ride toward the herd and turned to the others. "Every man keep a fresh horse picketed and saddled. Sleep with your side guns and rifles handy. When the dance starts, pick your man and go after him."

WATCHING them rope and saddled their horses, Drennan was satisfied. They were tough, seasoned punchers, ten of them besides himself and the cook, good cowhands and first-class gun fighters. He had done his own hiring and he knew there wasn't a yellow streak in any one of them. What was more, they all liked him; he knew that. He demanded the best that was in them and they gave it willingly.

That Bronc Drennan knew the ways of rustlers was proved shortly before midnight, the fag end of the shift when the guards were most likely to be drowsy and less alert. The crack of a shot brought the men out of their blankets with rifles in their hands. A second shot found them in their saddles and racing toward the herd with shrill yells to encourage the guards and disconcert the rustlers.

Drennan made out horsemen on the far side of the herd. He counted seven and recognized in the two nearest the cattle the JB guards. His eyes searched the moonlit range. It seemed unlikely that five rustlers would have attempted to run off three hundred head of cattle bunched so close to camp. Yet there were no others in sight. When the five turned their horses and ran, his suspicions were aroused. This was a trick to pull his men away from the herd.

When they were about two hundred yards away the five fanned out and their rifles began to bark. For a moment they held their ground, their horses rearing, pivoting, making short dashes in one direction and then another. They made impossible targets, and as the gap closed, they fled again, riding south toward the river.

Their course put them between the herd and the border, the only direction in which stolen cattle could be driven successfully. So long as the chase led south, Drennan was satisfied. The raid had failed and the rustlers were bent on escaping. Drennan led the pursuit, grimly determined to wipe them out.

But the raiders were superbly mounted. They fled in short dashes, wheeled to send a ragged volley at

their pursuers and were off again. Drennan was sure Curt Madden was not one of the five. They were all small men, Mexicans, he judged. He began to think that he had misjudged his friend, that there had been no trickery in Madden's warning.

Just short of the river and some three miles from camp the chase veered westward toward the badlands, ragged buttes where the fugitives might make a stand. The JB men pushed their horses to the limit, but the distance did not shorten enough to make accurate shooting. There were no better horsemen than these Mexican border thieves and they kept the best of their stolen horses for their own mounts.

In the broken country at the edge of the badlands the outlaws turned in behind a jagged upthrust of rock. Sheltered there, they sent shot after shot at their pursuers. The JB men flung from their horses, dropped flat and returned the fire, worming across the broken ground and spreading out to encircle their prey. Shrill, taunting yells answered them, and there came the beat of racing hoofs that died quickly in the distance.

A moment later Drennan caught sight of the rustlers speeding to the south. Further pursuit was useless, but at least the raiders had been foiled and the cattle saved. He called to his men and they returned to their weary horses. Mounting, they headed back for camp, their winded horses jogging along at a trot.

By the time they had retraced those six miles, considerably more than an hour had elapsed since the first shot had been fired. They came in sight of the wagon and pulled up, staring. The moon was just sinking below the horizon, but its light showed the wagon where it had been and the horses of the remuda grazing in the open. But that was all. The herd was gone!

Bronc Drennan's rage flared in a single blasting curse. His spurs raked his horse and he shouted the cook's name as the animal plunged toward the wagon. There was no answer, but he saw the canvas cover bulge as though it were being kicked violently. Flinging himself from the saddle, he sprang to the wagon seat and peered in. In the bed lay the cook and the two guards bound and gagged.

Drennan slashed the ropes and gags and lifted one of the guards to the ground. He cut the man's rush of oaths short. He knew well enough what had happened. The trick had been clever. The flight south had pulled his men away from the cattle in the only direction they would have followed. Others of the gang had run off the herd.

"How long since they jumped you?" he demanded.

"Not ten minutes after you left," the guard answered, his face white with rage and shame. "The shots started the herd. Dan and me and the cook headed 'em just as they got to yonder brush. It was there the devils jumped us."

Drennan swung around to the others. "Catch fresh horses. One of you rope my roan and throw the saddle on him." He turned back to the guard. "Was there a big white man in the bunch?"

The man shook his head. "They was all greasers far as I could make out."

FIVE minutes later the men, on fresh mounts, were riding south at a sharp trot. They would have gone at a run, but Drennan held them back. The cattle would have crossed the river by now, and he wanted the horses fresh for the trou-

ble that lay beyond. That Curt Madden was back of this smart play he was as certain as though he heard the man's taunting laugh.

"He done it just because I bragged that there wa'n't no cow thieves tough enough to raid the JB," Drennan fumed.

It was two o'clock and the night was pitch-black when they had put the river behind them, but three hundred steers left a trail in the sand that was easy to follow. It led straight toward the Sierra del Burro mountains, a high horseshoe-shaped range with the open end to the north. Two rocky ridges converged like the frog of a hoof toward the center. Beyond the point of the frog lay, so Drennan had heard, a walled basin that was a favorite hang-out for rustlers.

Within half an hour he made out a moving mass far ahead. He spoke to the men and the pace quickened. The mass took shape—cattle being pushed hard. Drennan put his horse to a run and the men spurred after him. The herd disappeared through the black opening that formed the frog of the horseshoe.

Bronc Drennan could guess well enough the danger that might lie in those forbidding hills. If Madden had told the truth about the rustlers organizing there might be a considerable force back in the basin. He hated to take his ten men in there and he cursed Curt Madden for the trick that made it necessary. One thing he knew to be true. If it had been Curt Madden with him, just the two of them, the big fellow would have gone into it with a grin and no thought of the odds. But now Madden was on the other side and there were no three men among these ten equal to him.

They swung into the wide frog between straight-walled cliffs and Drennan caught the rumble of the herd ahead. Another hundred yards and he heard the high-pitched yells of the raiders urging the cattle on. He spurred his horse with the hope of overtaking them before they met reinforcements.

The V-shaped space between the hills narrowed rapidly. A shot cracked and the bullet screamed from the cliff on his left. The distance shortened and other shots came, but they were high. In the velvety darkness of the canyon they could no longer see the cattle. Drennan made out the blacker streak of an obscure break in the right wall. They passed it and then there was no more shooting.

"They've quit the herd," a man behind Drennan said. "They turned into that break."

Drennan feared it was a trick to attack them from the rear. "Get past the cattle and head 'em!" he called out.

But the canyon had narrowed so that the herd filled it and Drennan's own men were crowding it ahead. There was nothing to do but follow until there was room to pass.

Strangely, there was no attack from the rear. Drennan could not understand it. The raid had been so well planned and so boldly carried out that he could not believe the rustlers would have given up their prize without a fight. More likely they were not giving battle because they knew their pursuers must either abandon the cattle or run into a trap ahead.

And then, quite suddenly, they were through the head of the gorge and the herd was running across a broad basin. Drennan shouted to his men and they spread out, riding hard to get in front of the cattle.

From some point ahead a long yell lifted. Here in the open valley

it was not so dark, and as Drennan pulled ahead of the herd he made out other cattle bunched near the upper end of the basin, a herd almost as big as the JB. So he was right; they *had* been drawn into a trap!

A confusion of shouting followed that first yell and he made out the moving shapes of men running toward picketed horses. From both sides his men swung in and the cattle, fagged from the hard drive, slowed and stopped. The JB men formed a wide-spaced line across the front and faced up the valley, rifles ready.

AND then Drennan noticed something that struck him as strange. The picketed horses had not been saddled. The men there were throwing leather on them. If they had expected this thing, why hadn't they been prepared? But there was no time to try to figure that out. He shouted an order and half the crew swung around and started to lash the cattle back.

Shots began to come at them. A score of men were mounted and firing, but they held back as though uncertain what force they were facing. The herd bedded down there was up and stirring, alarmed by the shooting. Abruptly, they started to run straight down the valley.

Drennan saw a chance here. He called to his men to let the herd go through. Their own cattle would join the stampede and there was no way for them to run except down the canyon.

More of the gang were mounted and the firing became a raged volley. The JB men had split to let the herd go through. From both sides they opened up with their rifles. But Drennan knew that once those twenty-five or thirty outlaws charged his crew would be annihilated. He shouted the order for them to give ground behind the running cattle. It was not far to the canyon and in the solid blackness of it the odds would not count so heavily against them.

As it was, only the dim light saved them; that and the fact that against the moving mass of cattle they made uncertain targets. Drennan dropped three horses in that retreat and saw two of the outlaws knocked from their saddles. Scorching lead sang past him and some of the cattle went down, but they made the canyon without the loss of a man or a horse.

The pursuers were compelled to bunch for a charge into the canyon head. Crowding close under the wall while the cattle plunged on through the gorge, the JB men took their toll. But Drennan heard shooting from the upper end of the basin. More of the rustlers were coming, he thought. He gave the word and his crew raced recklessly after the cattle.

As the cattle broke into the open country it seemed to Drennan that the number had increased beyond that of the combined herds. He wondered if there had been cattle held in that break in the canyon wall. If so, they must have joined the stampede.

"There'll be a job of cutting if we ever get this outfit back home," he told the man nearest him. "Likely them Swallowfork cows are in this bunch."

By the time the outlaws showed up, Drennan and his crew had the tired cattle lined out and headed for the river. From then it was a running, bitter fight until they reached the Rio Grande. Drennan and five others held the rustlers off while the rest drove the cattle across. They lost two horses and had one man wounded in the crossing, but no JB

men were among the dead that were left on Mexican soil. It was gray dawn now and reluctantly the outlaws gave up the fight.

Bronc Drennan experienced a grim sense of satisfaction. The JB had proved again that it was tough enough to hold its own against any gang of rustlers. He was bandaging the wounded man's arm when one of the crew pointed down the river and said, "What's that yonder?"

In the distance Drennan saw two mounted men riding out of the river on the north bank. They disappeared in the brush there, but not before Devlin recognized one of them. Curt Madden! The other, he was sure, was Keensabe.

A flare of violent anger drove Drennan toward his horse with the purpose of riding those two down and charging Madden with this raid against the JB. Clearer thinking stopped him. Madden must have seen the cattle bunched here as he crossed the river. He had avoided coming to meet him. Had he deliberately showed himself with the intention of drawing pursuit? He wasn't the sort to quit the game because he had lost one hand.

WHEELING, Drennan studied the cattle. About a third of them had begun to graze. They were mostly Swallowfork cows and a few others, some fifty head, carrying a Mexican brand unfamiliar to him. The JB herd and some of the Swallowfork were down, resting after the punishing drive.

Drennan turned to the man who had been wounded in the arm. "Can you set a horse?" he asked.

"Sure. I ain't hurt none to speak of."

"Ride down the river to that high ground and keep your eyes open," Drennan ordered. "I'm thinkin' we ain't seen the last of this business. If you ketch sight of riders anywhere, fire a shot and come in."

He sent one of the two men whose horses had been killed north and the other upstream with the same instructions. Then he turned to the rest of the crew.

"We've got more cattle than we can hold here in the open if them varmints jumped us again," he said. "Cut out the rest of them Swallowforks and herd that outfit off a ways. When we've done that we'll head our own for home." He suddenly laughed harshly. "Two of you cut out that Mex beef and throw it in with the JB. Work fast. We've got to get out of here."

Ordinarily it would have been a long job for tired men and horses, but most of the Swallowfork cattle had drifted out to graze. The rest were too exhausted to give much trouble. Still it took time and the sun was well up when the job was finished.

Drennan had just given the word to get the JB and Mexican cattle moving when a shot cracked downstream. Drennan snapped an order for two punchers to pick up the unmounted men. A moment later the wounded man raced in.

"Bunch of riders coming!" he called out.

"How many?" Drennan demanded.

"Eight, near as I could tell. They was a long ways off but comin' at a lope."

Drennan frowned. Only eight, and there had been three times that many south of the river. There must be more upstream. This attack would be made from both sides and there was no cover here for his crew. The man with the wounded arm couldn't use a rifle; he would be no good at long-range fighting.

When the lookouts were all in, Drennan lined up five men along one side of the herd and with the remaining five went to the other side. It was in that direction the approaching riders had been seen. His orders to his men were simple.

"If they come in a bunch, hold your fire till I give the word. If they spread out there won't be no question but they aim to jump us. Get down flat and start shootin' and make your shots count."

From down river the eight riders came in sight closely bunched. In the forefront Drennan recognized Curt Madden and snapped a command to his men. "That big fellow —lay off him. He's my meat and I want him alive."

He was prompted by no kindly feeling toward Madden. That his one-time friend had turned cow thief and deliberately tried to persuade him to quit his job so it would be easier to steal JB cattle seemed clear. He was anxious to get his hands on the man. He wanted the satisfaction of beating big Curt Madden into helplessness with his fists. When he had done that, he would send him back across the river to the thieving outlaws he had thrown in with.

THE eight riders came on steadily. Drennan was so intent on watching Madden that he gave little thought to the others except that he thought it was Keensabe riding on Madden's left. Then the JB man nearest Drennan said, "Ain't that old Swallowfork Bently with 'em?"

It was, but before Drennan could speak, Curt Madden threw up one hand. "Hold your lead, Bronc!" he called out.

Drennan made no answer. He stood waiting grimly, still suspecting a trick, although he couldn't understand Bently's presence. He recognized the five men behind Bently as Swallowfork hands.

The eight men pulled up within two yards of Drennan while the five JB men on the other side of the herd came around. Every man held his rifle ready.

Bently, owner of the Swallowfork outfit, seemed puzzled at the display of force. His glance went from Drennan to Curt Madden, but the latter gave him no chance to ask any questions. For once there was no grin on the big blond man's face. He waved a hand toward the Swallowfork cattle.

"There's your cows, Bently," he said. "I told you I'd get 'em back for you. If you've got that check handy I'll take it now. Five dollars a head was the price we agreed on."

Drennan watched Bently pull a check from his pocket and hand it to Madden. Three hundred head of Swallowfork cattle would bring nine thousand dollars at the present high price of beef steers. The fifteen hundred dollars Bently had just handed over would cut his profit considerably but it wasn't too much to pay to get his herd back. But Drennan didn't understand where Madden figured in this. If, as he suspected, Madden had stolen the Swallowfork herd, he could have got much more than fifteen hundred dollars for them south of the line. That fifteen hundred wouldn't amount to much, split among a gang of rustlers.

Keensabe had been sitting his horse a little to one side. He spoke now with a meaning smile. "I think, friend Madden, the Señor Drennan should understand that we are not cow thieves, that we but helped to recover cattle he would not have gotten back without us."

Curt Madden grinned and looked at the Swallowfork owner. "You tell

him, Bently. I ain't sure Bronc would believe me or Keensabe."

"I dunno how them JB cows come to be in this," said Bently, "but I can tell Drennan how you stack up around here."

He turned to Bronc. "It's this way, Drennan. Some of us old-timers with small outfits have been losin' so much stock we was goin' broke. The law couldn't stop the rustlin', so we figured to do somethin' about it. Madden, here, made us a proposition. Any time we lost cattle he'd trail 'em into Mexico, take 'em away from the rustlers or the crooked outfits that had bought 'em, and fetch 'em back. We didn't believe any man could do that, but he's been makin' good."

"Which don't explain how the JB beef herd happened to be run off so handy," Brennan said dryly.

Curt Madden's grin broadened. "Keensabe and I had located Bently's cows down in the Burro Mountains, but I didn't have men enough to take 'em away from that gang."

Bronc Drennan's temper flared. "So you run off the JB herd so we'd go down and pull Bently's cows out of that den?"

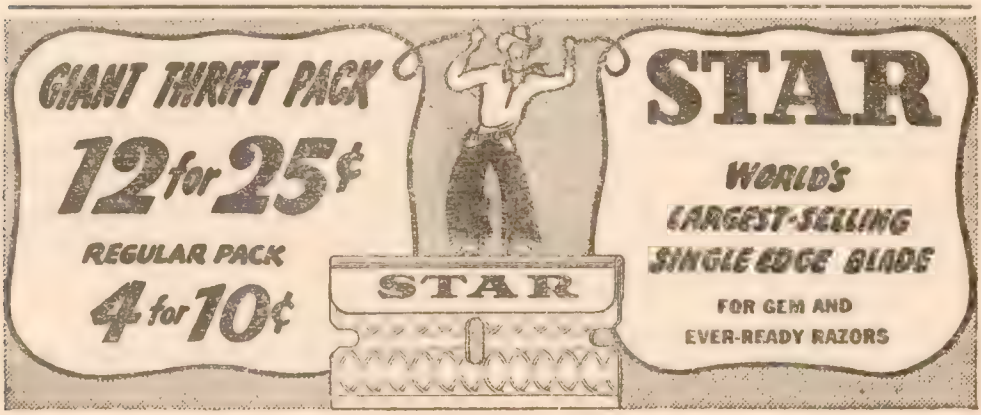
"Uh-huh, but keep your shirt on, fellow. Keensabe learned that that gang, thirty-five of 'em, was set to raid the JB in a few days. They figured to wipe you fellows out complete." Madden chuckled. "I heard you was quittin' the JB, but I knowed blame well if somebody told you there was trouble comin' up you'd stick. I'm shore obliged to you fellows for the help you give me."

He turned to Keensabe with a grave expression on his tanned face. "That fifty head of steers we was holdin' in the cross canyon; I judge we better take 'em back where we got 'em. That Mex outfit never come by 'em honest, but they don't belong to us neither."

Bronc Drennan let out a roar. "Try takin' them steers, fellow! Them steers stay with this outfit till I sell 'em. They mean about a hundred-dollar bonus for each man on the JB. If it hadn't been for these boys you never would have got them Swallowforks back across the river."

Curt Madden looked at the smiling Keensabe with a straight face, but his left eyelid dropped for an instant. "Seems like I remember that when you and me drove them steers into the canyon we had a notion somethin' like this would happen. Maybe we better pull out before this hombre gets violent. He's a right stubborn cuss."

THE END



THE LYNX PATROL

by KENNETH GILBERT

When the thing happened Constable Bill Lannister was cursing the luck that seemed to make the life of a Mounty more routine than exciting. He resented the fact that, as the youngest recruit on the Liard patrol, he seemed to draw all the menial chores. Checking the licenses of prospectors, seeing that trappers stayed within the boundaries of districts assigned to them, laying down the law to free traders who were suspected of bartering whiskey for prime fox pelts.

"Another year of this," he told himself disgustedly as he moved through the spruce forest where the new snow lay deep beneath the spired trees, with only the *sluff sluff* of his snowshoes to break the sepulchral silence, "and I'll chuck the thing. Why don't I get a chance at something worth while? Why don't they send *me* on the trail of that killer, old Megasook?"

At that moment he spied a great Canadian lynx, a gray ghost in long fur, silent as a windblown wisp of vapor drifting through the trees. He whipped up his service rifle for a quick shot, remembering the orders given him when he had left Fort McLeod. But before he could fire, the lynx vanished. He seemed to hear again the voice of his superior, Inspector Hamlin, speaking with official crispness yet almost casually, as if it bored him slightly to explain this assignment to the Liard patrol's rookie.

"Attend to this, Constable Lannister," the inspector had said. "I'm

sending you on a lone patrol into the Wolf Pass country to shoot cats! Aye! There's a report of an overrun of lynxes up there this winter. At least two trappers, both Indians, have been killed within a month. Benoit, the free trader at Fishtail Rapids, says they were found on the trail, badly clawed up. Must have been killed by lynxes. You'll look into this, Lannister, and shoot every lynx on sight. That will be all!"

"But, sir," Lannister protested, "I'd rather counted this time on having a chance at Megasook. He must be up there beyond the Dease Lake country, unless he's dead."

The inspector rubbed his gray, clipped mustache and yawned. "Not likely. Sergeant Brennan and a detail are having a look eastward, toward Findlay Forks. Meanwhile" —and his eyes twinkled although his voice was coolly final—"you'll look into this matter of lynxes. Draw two weeks' rations!"

Constable Bill Lannister, face reddening as he fought against further protest which, he knew, could only result disastrously for him, snapped a brisk salute, turned on heel and was gone.

In an outburst of indignation now, as he was reminded of his undignified task as a lynx hunter, he slammed a shot in the direction the lynx had gone, although realizing that the bullet probably was wild.

"Cat killer!" he told himself scornfully. "And you enlisted to be a man hunter!"

Then, to his astonishment he heard a wailing scream come from the brush where he had fired. He saw something floundering there in the thicket.

"Hit him, by all the luck this side of paradise!" he breathed in awe. "Wouldn't happen again in a dozen years. Well, Inspector Hamlin, there's *one* cat accounted for in obeying orders!" He started in the direction of the dying lynx but before he had taken a dozen steps he came to an abrupt halt. A few feet before him lay the body of a dead man—an Indian!

LANNISTER moved closer, staring curiously at the stiffened figure lying there in the snow, head pillowed on one arm. As curiously, he turned the man over and instinctively recoiled as he saw the face. There were deep wounds, the mark of claws! Two Indians had already been found dead in this fashion, according to what Inspector Hamlin had told him. Now there was a third killing for him to investigate.

"At least," he reflected, "I got the killer of this man!" He knew there was a dead lynx out there in the brush, victim of a chance shot. But, having reached the conclusion that he had avenged the killing of this Indian, he as quickly discarded the idea.

Even a quick examination told him that this man had been dead for hours. It was no fresh murder that Constable Bill Lannister had come upon. The Indian had apparently met death under the claws of one of the great gray cats, but it had happened some time before. Why, then, was the lynx still lurking about the spot?

He took another look at the garb of the dead Indian, studied the cast of the marred features, and his eyes narrowed at a sudden thought. The dead Indian looked like a Tahltan to him.

But what was a Tahltan doing up in this country? This region belonged to the Liards, and between them and Tahltans there had been a blood feud for countless ages. The

discovery seemed to be important, yet second thought told him that it might be mere coincidence. Every Mounty knew of the bitter enmity that lay between the two Indian tribes, knew too that Tahltans and Liards rarely poached on each other's territory. But here was evidence that it did happen occasionally.

"Why," Lannister reflected, "that's the way old Megasook got started as a killer. He's a Liard. Came over into Tahltan country three years ago and had to shoot his way out."

The Mounties had caught Megasook and he had been sentenced to hang. But he escaped after knifing a Mounty corporal, and had fled into the North. Right at the moment he was the Number One wanted man on the Mounties' list, not only because he was a murderer who had raised a death-dealing hand against the red-coated upholders of the law, but because of further harm he might do.

Megasook was a Liard witch doctor, a *tamanawos* man. If he remained at liberty he would arouse the savage Liards to the point where no white man would be safe within their territory. He might even lead his tribe in war against the Tahltans. So the Mounties pressed the hunt for him, and the man who took him into custody would win acclaim. It was no wonder that even Constable Bill Lannister, the newest recruit, was eager for a chance at the killer.

"Benoit's post must be fifty miles south of here," Lannister mused. "There's a Liard village maybe forty miles north. I'll go back to Benoit's and get a dog outfit to bring this man in."

But first he shook off his mittens, took out a leather-covered notebook and started to write down details of his find, that he might complete his report to Inspector Hamlin. He was jotting down notes when, out of nowhere, it seemed that a giant hand dealt him a tremendous blow that spun him around and off-balance so that he sprawled in the snow. But as he went down, dazed, he heard the woods echo with a thunderous report like that of a blackpowder trade gun.

Instinctively Lannister lay still, half-expecting a second shot, but none came. Then he reached swiftly for his own rifle with his right hand, but when he tried to use the left he found it curiously numb. He looked at it as though in surprise, for as yet he had felt no pain. In the sleeve of the fur parka he wore over his uniform there was a jagged hole, and from the tips of his fingers blood dripped upon the snow.

Neverthless, he stood up, holding the rifle with right hand against his shoulder, and looked about for the unseen enemy. The woods appeared empty. But a killer was lurking out there somewhere, and Lannister realized suddenly that the would-be murderer probably was reloading swiftly. He himself was standing in an exposed position. He could turn and make his way hurriedly for cover, but instead he elected to charge! Still holding the rifle single-handedly as best he could, he started rapidly over the snow in the direction whence the shot had come.

OF a sudden a new thought came to him. He was going straight toward the thicket where lay the lynx which he had shot, but which he had not yet bothered to examine!

Probably the thing he was doing was foolhardy but he was too fully aroused to consider consequences. At any moment another shot might come crashing out of the covert and

blast life from him. But he lurched ahead and no shot came, and at last he saw blood on the snow, and a wisp of long, gray fur. This was the spot where the lynx had died. Or *had* it died? There was no sign of the big cat now, no tracks indicating it had dragged itself away, that it had only been wounded after all. But Lannister did see the imprints of a man!

He had expected as much, yet the discovery gave him an eerie feeling. Until now he had believed himself to be the only living human being within many miles—but here was evidence that he was by no means alone. He stood there watchfully but heard no sound. He saw that the tracks led away deeper into the wilderness. Apparently the murderous ambusher had been content to fire that single shot and, being unable to reload quickly enough, had decided to flee rather than to face the rifle-armed man coming toward him.

"But," Lannister asked himself, "what in blazes became of that lynx? He was hit here, hit hard; that blood and fur on the snow proves it. Yet he's vanished completely, and there's no sign that he left this place." He studied the signs more closely but still could conceive no explanation of the puzzle.

As he stood there a dark stain widened on the snow where the blood continued to drip from his left hand. Suddenly aware that he was slowly bleeding to death he managed to free himself of the bulky parka, then work his left arm out of the uniform tunic. He took out his hunting knife and cut away the shirt that lay over the wound. As he had suspected, there was the mark of an old-fashioned leaden slug. Gratefully he saw that the missile had torn cleanly through the flesh. A few inches more and it would have penetrated his chest.

Ten minutes later, shaken and dizzy from the ordeal of cleansing the wound with strong antiseptic such as he carried in his first-aid kit, Lannister carefully slipped on the tunic again, then the parka. The wound had been bandaged and he was ready to carry on once more. His lips were white with pain, but set grimly.

Back there in the snow was a dead Indian. Routine code, Lannister realized, required that he go back to Benoit's, report the man's death and report, also, the attempt on his own life, then await instructions. But meanwhile there were tracks in the snow, tracks of a would-be killer, and every moment that Lannister delayed meant that the maker of those tracks was drawing farther and farther away. Deeper into the North.

"Got a score to settle with *you!*" Lannister declared ominously, eying the tracks. "That dead Tahltan can wait. He's got no job ahead of him, but I have! Inspector Hamlin might hold otherwise, but he's a long way off and need never know. I'll settle with the lad who ambushed me, and regulations be damned!" He let the rifle drop into the crook of his left arm and started off.

It was two days later, with the sub-Arctic twilight upon the land, that he smelled smoke and, from a point not far ahead, heard the choppy yelping of dogs. He guessed that he had come to the village of the Liards.

LANNISTER was tired, more tired than he ever remembered being. Though it no longer pained, his left arm was swollen and stiff and

it had been a constant handicap to him. He had tried to sleep on the trail but the throbbing arm would not let him rest, so he had found more comfort in keeping on the go. There was also the realization that he was pressing the maker of those tracks, for the grim persistence of the Mounty's hunt had given the other no time to relax. Lannister had forced the pace, not caring so much where the tracks led so long as he could eventually overtake the man who had made them. The Liard village ahead might be merely incidental or it might be important; Lannister vowed he would face the whole Liard nation, if necessary, to get the man who had wounded him. At least one would-be killer in the North would learn that it doesn't pay to raise a hand against the Mounted.

Lannister lifted his gun in a club-like attitude of defense as a swarm of dogs appeared suddenly from a cluster of snow-covered wickiups ahead. The dogs had caught his scent and were trying to stampede him. He blistered them with curses, swinging his gun threateningly, and they left him alone as he came up to the nearest habitation.

Indians appeared magically. They stared at him in ill-concealed surprise. "Unfriendly beggars!" thought Lannister. "Like to kill me if they thought they could get away with it. Maybe they will!" But he ploughed ahead as though a platoon of the Mounted was at his back.

One Indian who bulked taller than the rest stepped forward with uplifted hand.

"*Skukhanie!*" he called, using the renegade Sioux name for "white man." Lannister knew that these were former plains Indians who had come from the American prairies into the North after the Custer massacre, had followed the vanishing herds of buffalo and had stayed in the northern fastness when the last buffalo had been killed. "*Skukhanie!*" repeated the Liard, "where you go?"

Lannister stopped, swinging the rifle into his right arm so that he could use it single-handedly if necessary. He pointed toward the tracks in the snow. "I want that man!" he declared. "The man who made those tracks!"

The Liard peered at the imprints, then swung about and called excitedly to fellow tribesmen who were crowding behind him. They jabbered among themselves for a moment. Then the first man addressed the Mounty.

"You go back, *skukhanie,*" he announced. "You go quick. Bimeby trouble come!"

Lannister flourished his gun muzzle menacingly. Night was clamping down over this primitive town of the Liards. In a semicircle about him ranged half-starved dogs, willing to attack when they could get up their courage to do so. Beyond them was a group of the Liards themselves, potentially dangerous if they believed they could get away with it.

"Trouble?" demanded Lannister stoutly. "There'll be more trouble if you don't show me the man who made those tracks!"

Again there was a heated colloquy among them, then the first Liard spoke once more. By the Indian's tone Lannister knew that they had debated and decided something among them. He waited. All he wanted was the man who had ambushed him.

"*Skukhanie,*" said the Liard contemptuously, "you one big fool! You go 'way quick, or you die!"

"Yeah?" grated Lannister. "We'll see—" But he broke off as his quick eyes caught a glimpse of a figure moving stealthily among the wickiups. It was the figure of a man who looked bedraggled, trail-worn. "*That's* the man I want!" he announced. "Stand aside, you damned savages!"

But the man he sought had vanished. Like a ground squirrel among the rocks. One moment he was there, the next he had disappeared. Yet Lannister had ideas about where he had gone, for there was a tunnellike opening in the snow, a burrow such as might have been used by sled dogs to reach the sheltered lee of one of the crude structures where the Liards lived. The man had not passed beyond that spot and the aroused Mounty was willing to bet that he had dodged into the hole.

"Like a bloody rabbit chased by dogs!" he thought. "Well, here goes!" He dropped to knees and, pushing the rifle ahead of him began crawling.

THE place was so small that Lannister's broad shoulders at times touched both sides of the caribou-skin walls. A warm smell assailed his nostrils, the smell of human bodies within a cramped space. He was going to meet human beings, and soon, but he merely shook his head until the furred hood of his parka settled back farther, and he went on.

The tunnel was pitch black at first, but presently he descried the glow of a light ahead. Curiously enough, he wondered what Inspector Hamlin would say if he found the youngest member of the Liard patrol in this situation—Hamlin, who lived by the book, whose acts were guided by regulations.

"Stuffy old beggar!" thought young Bill Lannister a little scornfully. "I wanted to have a go at that killer, Megasook, but instead Hamlin sent me shooting cats! Well, I'll show him!" At the moment he was rebellious of everything but the idea of revenge. He'd wade through hell and high water to get the man who had taken that pot shot at him, who dared defy the Mounted. "I'll pull off his ears! I'll—"

But he paused suddenly as his gaze fell upon a strange sight.

Less than ten feet ahead of him the tunnel widened abruptly, and at the opposite end of the chamber was a queer figure. He saw that it was apparently a stuffed lynx. The thing was posed in a sitting position, the mouth opened until the long cutting fangs were exposed in a terrifying snarl. The tasselated ears were laid back close to the skull. Eyes made of some greenish stone glared with a lambence like that of the animal itself in life. The thing was crudely done, yet there was a touch of skill about it that made it seem startlingly real.

But Bill Lannister's gaze was drawn to the long, fluffy paws of the creature, which were lifted as though in an attitude of supplication, or maybe it was threatening defense! At that moment a voice boomed hollowly in the passage.

"*Skukhanie!*" it intoned. "Go away! Go far! Quick. Never come back!"

Bill Lannister's lip curled contemptuously. "Yeah? Come out of there, you heathen!" He lurched forward, but as he did so he dropped his face, covering it with one furred arm. The next instant his service rifle blasted.

But not before there was a clicking, slithering sound, instantly fol-

lowed by darkness. Yet in the gloom Lannister was fighting, struggling with a figure which he had dragged from behind the stuffed image of the lynx.

Close infighting it was, and the Mounty was handicapped by his injured arm. The sharp bite of burned powder hung chokingly in the air. There were thudding sounds, mumbled curses, and then a wailing cry of defiance such as no white man could ever make. Then Bill Lannister, still battling with some unseen enemy, was crawling out of the tunnel, dragging a kicking, screaming thing behind him.

Outside, Lannister rose to his feet. By some miracle of will power he had forced his left hand to obey him once more. In it he clutched the service rifle, while in his right was the weazened figure of an evil-looking old Indian. Lannister's face was badly scratched, his parka was torn, but there was the light of triumph in his eyes as he looked at his captive.

"Got you!" he exclaimed jubilantly. He knew this was the killer of three Tahltans. He could even guess the meaning of it. Tahltans had come into the Liard country and had been trapping lynx, regardless of the fact that the gray cat of the North is one of the strongest totems of some branches of the Liard tribe.

Lannister cursed himself for not thinking of it before; he had often heard of this strange worship of the lynx, whose cunning seems to imply an alliance with the forces of witchcraft in which the savage Liards believe. Probably the Tahltans had been captured, forced to crawl through this same tunnel from which Lannister himself had just emerged. At the far end of it, confronted suddenly by the figure of the stuffed lynx they had suffered wounds from which they had later died—a symbolic end under the paws of the big cat which they had hunted in defiance of Liard tradition. Bill Lannister knew he was right the instant he had seen the figure of the lynx—*because its uplifted paws had claws extended, ready to kill, instead of being retracted normally within the soft fur of its pads!*

He shook his prisoner again. "You tried to kill me because I shot that lynx!" he charged. "You picked up that cat and packed it off. That's why I could find no further trace of it!" The Liard, only half understanding his words, snarled back at him.

"Back, you devils!" Lannister bellowed at the other Liards who were crowding too close, "or I'll take along the lot of you single-handed!" It was a prodigious threat, utterly impossible of fulfillment, but there was something so terrifying about this indomitable white man, who wore under his parka the awe-inspiring uniform of the Mounted, that the courage of the Indians wilted. Nor did they threaten him as he started off in the gloom with his prisoner, bound for Benoit's past as the first leg of his long trek back to Fort McLeod. So it was that captor and captive came to Benoit's nearly five days later, both more nearly dead than alive.

THE door of the post opened, but instead of Benoit, the tall figure of Inspector Hamlin was framed in the opening. Despite his weariness, Constable Bill Lannister straightened in surprise. Then, remembering himself, he lifted his right hand in what was intended for a brisk salute.

"Reporting," he said thickly,

"from the cat-killing patrol, sir! Shot one lynx. Then this ruddy savage ambushed and wounded me. Bringing him in as the killer of three Tahltans—"

Hamlin's eyes widened a little at sight of the prisoner, but his voice was calm as ever. The rest of the Liard patrol came out, but Hamlin moved closer to Lannister and spoke in a low tone:

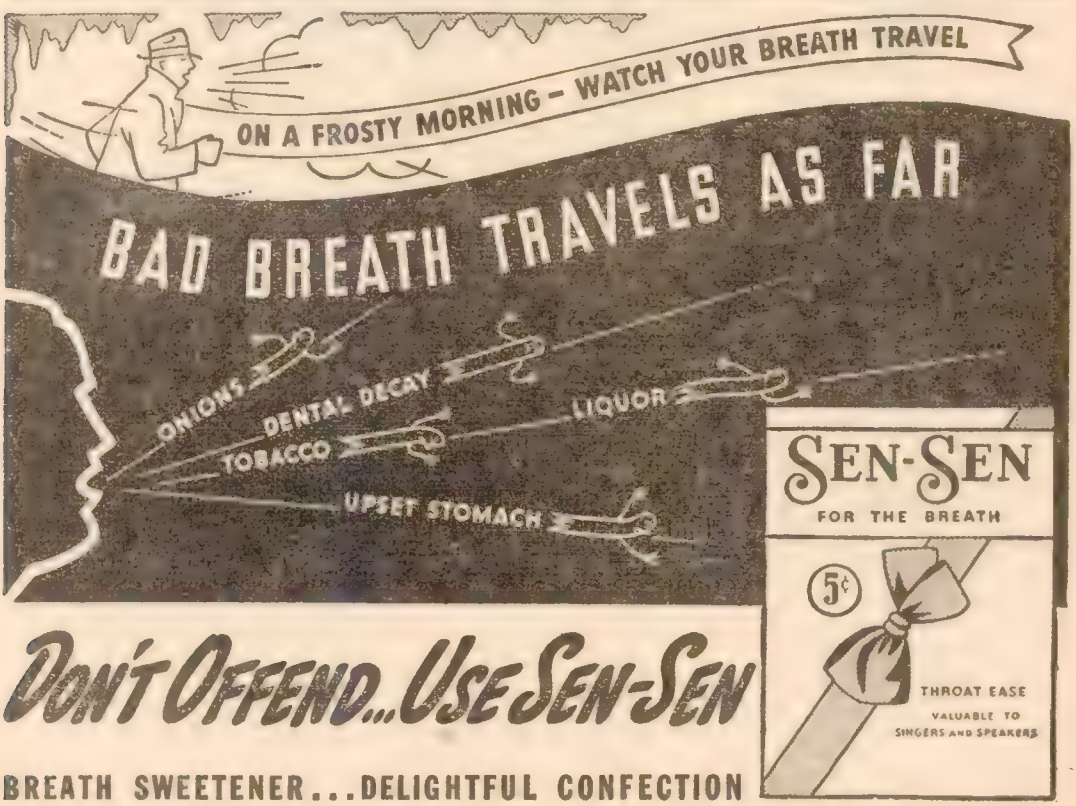
"Very good, constable," he said approvingly. "If you hadn't shown up by tomorrow we were setting out in search for you. I see," he added calmly, "that you have fulfilled your mission!" And he nodded toward the sullen prisoner.

Before the astonished Lannister could reply, the inspector went on, "When you have been longer in the service, you will understand why it seemed best to proceed in this manner. The way of the Mounted, let us say. You, Lannister," he added kindly, "are a bit young and brash. If you had understood that you were really going after Megasook instead of merely to hunt down a few lynxes"—and he smiled fleetingly—"you might have overreached yourself in your enthusiasm. Call it a test—this way of the Mounted. My congratulations, Lannister, that you have justified my faith in you!"

"You . . . you said—" began Lannister, eying his prisoner, then the inspector.

"You are aware, of course," cut in Hamlin, "that it is Megasook you have there—by the scruff of the neck!"

THE END.



KIN TO THE UNTAMED

by NORMAN A. FOX

SNORTING angrily, the great wild stallion, Thunderhead, was raising his own brand of blazes in the breaking corral when Rabbit Greer rode in from the hills. Rabbit shivered at the sight. Something about that sleek, black-bodied creature always made Rabbit tremble, though the horse fascinated him. Yet when Rabbit turned his back on the baleful white eyes of Thunderhead and stared toward nearby Halfway

House, a greater fear filled him. The signs said there might be a killing between suns.

Strangely enough, the ungainly three-storied bulk of Halfway House looked peaceful with the mountains looming behind and the dying sun shadow-mottling the scarps. But even from the distance Rabbit sensed the tension that gripped three of the four men who stood on the wide porch.

Catamount McCoy, burly and black-bearded, owned Halfway Ranch, while Still Bill Hawkins and Keno Maze, lean and shifty-eyed, pretended to work for the spread. The fourth man, lithe, tawny-headed and younger than the others, was a stranger—and in danger for that very reason.

"—figgered I'd stay the night, if you'd let me," the stranger was saying when Rabbit dismounted and came forward. "Me, I hanker to eat at a table and sleep with springs under me once in a while. Name's Al Ramsey."

Rabbit saw quick, suspicious glances shuttle between Catamount and his crew. Why in blazes, the boy wondered, had this Al Ramsey come here? Honest men of the Washoe country shunned Halfway as they shunned smallpox. Honest men said Catamount's place was a relay station for outlaws, where a wanted man could exchange a worn horse for a ready one, at a price. And honest men were dead right, even if they couldn't prove it.

The Halfway boss spat, asked bluntly, "What's yore business, Ramsey?"

"Bronc bustin'," Al Ramsey answered easily. "Hail from Wyoming way."

Again those suspicious glances passed back and forth. Rabbit knew what they were thinking. Each was wondering if Al Ramsey toted a star. Each was remembering Lon Wingo, hidden this past week in the spacious attic of Halfway House while the law of three counties combed the country for him in vain. Each man had grown suspicious of shadows lately and nerves were keyed to the breaking pitch. It would be swift doom for Al Ramsey if suspicion crystallized into certainty.

"A bronc buster," Keno Maze said with a meaning grin. "Reckon we ought to have him top Thunderhead, boss?"

Rabbit, hesitantly mounting the porch steps, almost gasped at the suggestion. Obviously Keno was calling Ramsey's bluff, if it were a bluff, yet his method was nothing short of murder. No Halfway man had succeeded in riding Thunderhead since they'd captured the stallion a fortnight before. Rabbit knew horses, knew them far better than anyone suspected. And he knew Thunderhead could unseat Satan himself.

Yet Rabbit couldn't warn this Ramsey. Even when Ramsey greeted him with a cheerful, "Hello, button," the boy could do no more than nod. Long ago Catamount had told him to bridle his tongue when strangers were around. The command had been emphasized with a quirt and obedience had since become a fixed habit with Rabbit Greer.

So now he passed quickly across the porch, heading for the door, but Keno Maze blocked his way. Rabbit backed away instinctively, scorched by the anger in Keno's eyes. Keno was the smallest of the Halfway men yet Rabbit, sixteen and under-sized, was scrawny and insignificant before him.

"Time yuh showed back, yuh lazy

runt," Keno shouted. "I told yuh to make my bunk, then curry my hoss and clean my guns. Them hog-laigs weren't touched."

Rabbit looked helplessly around, for he knew full well what was coming. Kicks and cuffs had always been his lot and it was anybody's privilege to abuse him. Catamount was his stepfather, but Rabbit couldn't expect help from him or Still Bill.

"I'm plumb sorry, Keno," Rabbit said hastily. "The others had some chores for me and—"

KENO didn't wait for the rest of it. He struck at Rabbit, a blow that sent the boy reeling. Arms thrown up for protection, Rabbit sprawled to the porch. Then Al Ramsey was standing before Keno, his smile belied by the chill in his eyes.

"You any kin to this youngster?" the bronc buster asked.

"Me?" Keno snorted. "Kin to this gopher-hearted brat? I should say not, mister!"

"Then keep your hands off him," said Al Ramsey and his fist exploded against Keno's stubbled chin. "If you've got to hit, try hittin' me!"

Keno slammed against the floor. He jerked at his gun, but Al Ramsey moved even faster. His hand flowed to a holster, came back, and a leveled gun was in his fist.

"Try it that way, too, if you want," Ramsey invited. "Me, I'm suggestin' you forget about it." He holstered the weapon. "You gents say you had a hoss that needed gentlin'?"

It was a moment charged with dynamite. Rabbit half expected to see Catamount go for his gun, but Catamount, staring at Ramsey, looked a little shaken. As for Still Bill, he might have been a statue. It was Keno, wiping blood from his lip as he picked himself up, who eased the tension.

"Yeah," he jeered. "Let's see how you assay on guts down at the corral."

Without a word, Ramsey turned his back on the trio and headed for the corral. The act was eloquent of contempt, but Keno seized the opportunity to whisper to the others.

"Let the horse break his damn neck," he said hoarsely. "That'll save a bullet."

Catamount grinned his approval. With the three hurrying after Ramsey, Rabbit trailed along at a discreet distance. In his heart was a growing fear for Al Ramsey. Yet when the bronc buster swung into the saddle, Rabbit would ride with him in spirit for Rabbit had found a hero.

Al Ramsey had been kind to him. That was unbelievable, for kindness belonged to the misty past, along with memories of Rabbit's dead mother whose place he had taken as ranch drudge. Rabbit had known brutality and the sullen indifference of the furtive-eyed fugitives who sometimes stopped at the spread, but kindness was an alien thing. It made a god of Al Ramsey in the eyes of Rabbit Greer.

And Ramsey was a bronc buster! That made him even greater, for Rabbit himself hoped someday to break horses. Catamount and the others would have scoffed at his ambition. That was why Rabbit had never mentioned the crude corral he'd erected over in Shoshone Canyon. They'd never believe he'd choused a few wild horses into that corral and actually rode the broncs. They'd say he was too yellow for such work.

It was partly true, he knew. He'd never have the nerve to try and top a horse like Thunderhead. That stallion wasn't born to be ridden. Yet some day he might make a passable horse breaker. Therefore Rabbit watched intently as the four men, mounted now, used their combined skill to get Thunderhead to the snubbing post. Screwing gear on the stallion was another ordeal. All four were tight-lipped when Al Ramsey climbed into the saddle.

Thunderhead, freed of ropes, took a split second to realize the fact. Then, snorting, the stallion exploded into action. First he headed skyward as though to chase the sun that had slipped behind the peaks. When he hit the ground, a bone-breaking descent, he tried to turn himself inside out. White eyes rolling, the stallion used a dozen devil-sired tricks, but still Al Ramsey, his face chalky, stuck.

IT was a magnificent show. Rabbit edged closer for a better view and it was then he overheard Catamount and the others who were bunched together in whispered conversation. And hearing their talk, Rabbit forgot about horse and rider.

"—but supposin' he ain't a lawman," Catamount was arguing. "He rides like a bronc buster. A killin' is just about all the excuse Washoe law'd need to come up here and smoke us out."

"Yeah, but if this galoot gets wind that Wingo's hidin' hereabouts there'll be hell to pay anyhow," Keno Maze countered. "Lawman or no, we gotta get rid of him."

"Knock him over the head and toss him into the corral," Still Bill suggested. " 'Tain't our fault if a hoss buster gets trampled bustin' a bronc."

Catamount took a second to weigh

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the thought. "That's it," he decided. "The law wouldn't be too suspicious. We'll—"

A squeal from Thunderhead dragged Rabbit's eyes to the corral. He had a brief glimpse of Al Ramsey shooting from the saddle, arcing through the air. Rabbit shut his eyes as he pictured the bronc buster on the ground, helpless beneath flailing hoofs. But when Rabbit looked again, Ramsey had cleared the corral top and was gasping on the ground.

"Now," Keno whispered. "Bend a hoglaig over his head, somebody!"

But Al Ramsey was reeling to his feet, leaning against the very post where he had hung his gun belt. Opportunity had come and gone. With a weapon within reach, Ramsey was safe. The three owl-hooters wouldn't risk anything less than a sure thing.

"Couldn't top him, eh, Ramsey?" Keno asked maliciously.

Ramsey frowned. "You wouldn't savvy, I reckon, but breaking that horse would break his heart. It'll take a whip to do the trick." He turned to McCoy. "I'm advisin' you to let that horse go. He wasn't made for the saddle."

"To hell," Catamount growled. "I'll break him or I'll kill him, savvy?"

Fighting light flared and died in Ramsey's eyes. No range man interferes between a horse and its owner without great provocation. Ramsey only watched while Still Bill and Keno rode into the corral to tie Thunderhead to the snubbing post again. There they left the saddled stallion at a curt command from Catamount.

"Leave him be a spell," the ranch owner said. "After supper I'm goin' to try my hand at ridin' him again."

It didn't fool Rabbit. Catamount wasn't mounting that horse. He wanted Thunderhead saddled because Al Ramsey was going to be tossed into that corral to die. To the law the signs would point to an accident.

Such was the fate in store for Al Ramsey. The very thought of it choked Rabbit Greer, leaving him with a futile sense of his own smallness and impotence. He was desperately eager to help the horse breaker and just as hopelessly unable to do so. At the house again he had no chance to go near Ramsey, for Catamount gave him whispered orders to take a tray of food to Lon Wingo in the attic. Rabbit found the mean-faced outlaw pacing restlessly.

"Who's the stranger?" Wingo demanded. "I saw him from the window."

Rabbit told him. "Catamount says for you to keep in here till the gent's gone," he added.

Wingo cursed. Loose-lipped and ferret-eyed, he looked the outlaw he was and it wasn't hard to believe he'd shot a bank cashier without provocation. Ruthlessness sprouted from him. "Damn McCoy," he stormed. "I'm payin' him good money to keep out of jail. Being penned up here is worse'n any jug. I gotta breathe some air or I'll go loco."

WINGO was still ranting when Rabbit slipped from the attic to a solitary supper in the kitchen. The boy went to his bedroom soon afterward. But he was still awake and dressed when boot heels thudded in the hallway and he heard Catamount's gruff voice as the ranch boss ushered Al Ramsey to another ground-floor bedroom.

After that, silence fell upon Halfway House. Yet Rabbit, crouching in the darkness, wondered if anyone was actually sleeping beneath that roof. Surely not the restless Lon Wingo. Catamount and his crew would be awake, too; silently waiting for sleep to claim Al Ramsey. And Rabbit, himself, wouldn't close his eyes this night.

Somehow he had to warn the horse breaker. Yet Catamount might detect such treachery and the wrath of Catamount was a terrible thing. Rabbit knew that wrath for it had marked him many times, destroying the initiative and courage and manliness that are every boy's heritage. Never in his life had Rabbit deliberately crossed Catamount McCoy.

But he had to think of Al Ramsey who had saved him from a beating at Keno's hands. Al Ramsey had left a mark upon Rabbit, too, a different mark, yet one just as deep. Thus ancient fear and new-found loyalty battled until Rabbit, fearful of the slightest sound, slipped down the dark hallway.

He eased into Ramsey's room without knocking. Then even caution was forgotten as he stood anchored in speechless surprise. The rising moon, spraying its light through the window, spread a silver blanket across an empty bed. Al Ramsey was gone!

Rabbit's first thought was that the horse breaker had already been overpowered, removed. Yet that was ridiculous, for he had heard no sound. Then he glanced through the window and relief surged through him, for there was Al Ramsey crossing the moon-bathed yard toward the pump which stood like a rigid, one-armed sentinel.

The horse breaker was going for a drink. Here, then, was as good a chance as any to warn the man. Ramsey's coat and holster-laden cartridge belt hung on a chair, so Rabbit scooped them up and snaked out of the window. He'd give the things to Ramsey, urge him to get his horse and leave without ever entering that death trap of a house again. But before Rabbit was halfway across the yard, a tall form loomed in the darkness near the pump. Lon Wingo had left his hiding place in spite of Catamount's warning!

"Lookin' for somebody, stranger?" the outlaw challenged Ramsey.

"Why, no. Just gettin' a drink," Ramsey's voice reflected his surprise. "But, say—who are you? Ain't I seen your face before?"

And Rabbit Greer, knowing that Ramsey had signed his death warrant with the question, managed to shout a warning. "Run, Ramsey!" he shrieked. "Run like hell!"

Wingo cursed, snatched for the gun thonged against his thigh. But Al Ramsey had gotten an inkling of peril and his fist lashed at Wingo, flattened the outlaw. Wingo managed to get his gun unsheathed, but Ramsey kicked the weapon aside.

Now a gun spoke from the porch. Rabbit, glancing, saw Catamount, Still Bill and Keno spilling down the steps, triggering as they came. Al Ramsey had recognized this new peril, too. Zigzagging, the horse breaker headed for the barn, a dodging, shadow-shrouded target.

Rabbit, his heart hammering, angled after him. He and Ramsey reached the barn together and Rabbit might have felt the weight of the horse breaker's fist if he hadn't spoken quickly. "It's me, the button," he said hoarsely. "Here's your guns. Keep them jaspers busy and I'll saddle up for you."

Ramsey wasted no words. While Rabbit scrambled for gear, the horse breaker hunkered inside the doorway, pouring fire at the fire from the outer darkness. Flame mottled the night, but Ramsey was holding the others at a distance when Rabbit touched his arm.

"Your hoss is saddled," the boy whispered. "Go out the back way. They won't be countin' on you movin' so fast."

"I'm thankin' you, button," Ramsey said. "Mind tellin' me why them gents crave my scalp?"

"They think you're a sheriff. And when you walked right into Wingo and—"

"Wingo, eh? Now I savvy where I saw his face. It's on dodgers from here to Wind River. But, kid, what'll they do to you for sidin' me?"

RABBIT shivered. Things had moved too swiftly to let him think about that. He had betrayed Catamount. Therefore, his only hope of escaping the penalty was by further betrayal. He had no choice.

"Never mind about that," he said shakily. "I can hide myself hereabouts. Ain't time for another saddlin' and we can't ride double. Get down to Washoe town and bring back a posse."

Ramsey's fingers dug into Rabbit's shoulders. "You get under cover, kid. I'll bring a posse a-foggin' mighty fast!"

Then Al Ramsey was into the saddle. This wasn't the time for discussion and both knew it. Rabbit eased back to the rear door and Ramsey bolted into the darkness. Rabbit watched him go, feeling suddenly alone and helpless. Guns still popped outside and startled curses heralded Ramsey's escape.

Rabbit knew he would have to get under cover. Time was precious, but before he could move he heard the barn door slide again. He saw moonlight etch a rectangle across the floor and into that rectangle stepped Catamount McCoy to block the path of escape.

Catamount was alone and Rabbit might have stood a chance if he acted quickly. He might have dodged around the man, gained the outside. He might have done a lot of things, but he only stood there. All his life Rabbit had looked upon Catamount as his master. Catamount represented tyranny that couldn't be challenged. So Rabbit Greer stood frozen as the Halfway boss lumbered toward him.

"Yuh little rat!" Catamount snarled. "Yuh helped that law dog get away. I'm gonna kill yuh for that, but first I'll give yuh the whalin' of yore life!"

He reached for the frightened boy and booted him into the moonlight and toward the house. There he flung him on the porch. A blacksnake whip, cruel and heavy, hung nearby. Rabbit had tasted that whip before. He tasted it again as Catamount snatched it, brought it hissing across his back.

Black, murderous wrath was boiling in Catamount McCoy. He might have wielded that torturing blacksnake until his arm gave out, but before he could swing the whip a second time, Keno, Still Bill and Lon Wingo stampeded across the yard toward him.

"He got away," Keno panted. "He's headed down the trail toward Washoe."

Catamount dropped the whip. "He's goin' for a posse," he guessed quickly. "He recognized Lon, shore as shootin'. We got one chance and

that's to take the Shoshone Canyon trail and head off that galoot. Let's be ridin'."

The four thundered toward the barn. Cowering on the porch, Rabbit saw the shadows swallow the quartet, spew them forth on horseback. Then darkness gobbled them again. Rabbit knew where they were going. There were a lot of secret trails back in the mountains. Many of them led to Washoe. Rabbit could take still a third trail and possibly reach Ramsey before the others did. He wondered why Catamount hadn't thought of that.

When he staggered to the barn, the boy understood. There had only been four horses in the barn and Lon Wingo had taken Rabbit's. There was no way of leaving the ranch, for there was no horse to ride.

Shuffling back to the porch, Rabbit sagged upon the steps with black despair bowing his shoulders. He could escape the vengeance of Catamount, for he could take to the hills on foot. Even the hills were kinder than Catamount. But that wouldn't save Al Ramsey. Rabbit Greer would have to sit through the long hours while Catamount headed off Ramsey, laid a bushwhacker's trap.

Then Rabbit became conscious of an alien sound and he raised his brooding eyes. Moonlight glinted on the black sheen of Thunderhead as the stallion snorted at the snubbing post. Here was a horse.

Yet here, also, was a thing that Rabbit feared almost as much as he feared Catamount McCoy. And the very thought of approaching that white-eyed devil chilled the boy's soul.

It couldn't be done. Yet he watched Thunderhead in fascinated silence, watched him as a man eyes a gun when he considers suicide. And as he watched, Rabbit Greer knew

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Sports fans everywhere ought to read "My Son Plays Football For Me." It gives the inside dope on what happens when a father coaches his famous football-playing son!

NOVEMBER

Athlete

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he had to ride Thunderhead, had to do the impossible.

"He wasn't made for the saddle," Al Ramsey had said. *"It'll take a whip to do the trick."*

Rabbit's eyes strayed to the whip snaking along the porch. Hesitantly he reached for it, hefted it. Just as hesitantly, he went inside, found a gun and belt. Strapping the belt about his scrawny middle, he came to the porch and, like a hypnotized person, headed toward the corral, whip in hand.

This wasn't Rabbit Greer who was about to do this thing. He couldn't believe his own intention. This was somebody else, a different Rabbit Greer, the kind of boy he might have been if Catamount hadn't hammered the spirit out of him long ago. Yet somewhere a spark of that spirit still lived. That spark had made him side Al Ramsey tonight. That spark was sending him into the corral.

Thunderhead stiffened at his coming. Rabbit struck the stallion again and again, dodged those hate-launched hoofs. Then he swung into the saddle, yanked the rope that held the horse. Now was the real test, but the whip was equal to it. The lash hissed like a live thing and Rabbit grew sick at the sound. This work wasn't to his liking, but it was effective. Thunderhead screamed in rage, but his bucks lacked power, for he was beaten.

THEY streaked out of the corral and toward the trail Rabbit had chosen. And Thunderhead put all of his futile hate into that wild ride while the moon paled above and the darkness before dawn swathed the land.

It was downhill and it was dangerous, but Rabbit stuck. Now his stolen training in Shoshone Canyon stood him in good stead. He was riding as he never rode before. And when dawn daubed the east with color, the trail forked into Al Ramsey's trail and the signs said Rabbit had beaten them all to this spot.

Here was a perfect place for those who kill from cover. Rimrock frowned on the trail and thick bushes made a natural screen. Rabbit took Thunderhead deep into the bushes and tied him there. Then he hurried back to hunker in a pocket of rocks and wait for Ramsey. Saddle leather creaked not many minutes later. But it was Catamount and his crew who rode into view.

Rabbit hadn't counted on that. Yet he suddenly woke to the amazing knowledge that he wasn't afraid of Catamount and those others. A miracle? Rabbit didn't know. He only knew he had ridden Thunderhead after these men had failed. He only knew that he had proved himself the best of them. He had discovered courage, and that courage prompted him to send a bullet to kick up the dust before them.

Catamount stared. "It's the kid," he gasped and went for his gun. He never lived to trigger it. Rabbit spilled him from the saddle just as the others spread out, firing as they went. With calculated coolness, the boy aimed at Lon Wingo and Wingo died as he'd lived, a gun in his hand, a curse on his lips.

Rabbit had seldom handled a gun, but the rocks gave him an advantage and he poured lead recklessly. Bullets droned past him unheeded. He creased both Still Bill and Keno and he laughed shrilly, remembering their endless abuse.

The two grew wary. Seeking such shelter as they could, they inched forward. Rabbit was peering for them when lead tore away his sombrero. He was trying to line Still

Bill in the sights when another gun spoke and Bill pitched forward before Rabbit could fire. Startled, Keno spun to trigger, gasped and died. Then Rabbit saw Al Ramsey loping up, a smoking gun in his hand. The horse breaker leaped from the saddle and raced to the boy.

"You hurt, kid?" he demanded.

"Reckon not," said Rabbit. "Them gents aimed on headin' you off."

Al Ramsey whistled. "And they was afraid of a lawman," he said. "Hell, it only took a hoss buster and a kid to tangle their loop. Looks like we make a team, button. How'd you like to ride with me, learn the hoss-bustin' business?"

"Mighty swell," Rabbit grinned. "But wait here. I got a surprise for you."

Diving into the bushes, Rabbit left the puzzled horse breaker behind. When the boy wormed his way to Thunderhead, the weary stallion snorted, rolling white, baleful eyes. Rabbit got the whip, raised it. Thunderhead dropped his head meekly.

And suddenly the whip was like a hot iron in Rabbit's hand and he dropped it. The whip was boss. A whip in Catamount's hand had bossed Rabbit, lashed the courage and spirit out of him. Tonight he had regained his courage, freed himself from the whip. There was heady sweetness in that freedom.

Yet he was going to take that same freedom away from Thunderhead. With the whip he could master the horse just as Catamount had mastered him. But Rabbit would never have loyalty or affection from Thunderhead, any more than Catamount had had those things from him. The whip couldn't win them. The whip could only break a fine, free spirit.

Rabbit went to Thunderhead. Quickly he stripped gear from the stallion, cut the tethering rope. He watched Thunderhead sniff suspiciously, then bolt into the bushes. Rabbit was still standing when Thunderhead was skylined on the rimrock. The boy raised his eyes in salute. "Nobody'll ever whip *us* again," he said aloud.

Al Ramsey had surely seen the stallion before Thunderhead whisked out of sight. It wasn't the surprise the boy had planned for his new partner. Yet Rabbit was grinning happily as he pushed through the bushes, the saddle on his back, and he had a hunch Al Ramsey would be grinning, too.

THE END

"I TALKED WITH GOD"

(yes, I did—actually and literally)

and, as a result of that little talk with God some ten years ago, a strange new Power came into my life. After 43 years of horrible, sickening, dismal failure, this strange Power brought to me a sense of overwhelming victory, and I have been overcoming every undesirable condition of my life ever since. What a change it was. Now—I have credit at more than one bank, I own a beautiful home, drive a lovely car, own a newspaper and a large office building, and my wife and family are amply provided for after I leave for shores unknown. In addition to these material benefits, I have a sweet peace in my life. I am happy as happy can be. No circumstance ever upsets me, for I have learned how to draw upon the invisible God-Law, under any and all circumstances.

You too may find and use the same staggering Power of the God-Law that I use. It can bring to you too, whatever things are right and proper for you to have. Do you believe this? It won't cost much to find out—just a penny post-card or a letter, addressed to Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 495-10, Moscow, Idaho, will bring you the story of the most fascinating success of the century. And the same Power I use is here for your use too. I'll be glad to tell you about it. All information about this experience will be sent you free, of course. The address again—Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 495-10, Moscow, Idaho. Advt. Copyright 1939 Frank B. Robinson.

We have just had a note from Ralph Rivers, whose letter appeared in the August 12th issue, calling attention to the fact that the name of his post office was printed indistinctly and asking us to correct it. His address is Lulu Island, Eburne P. O., British Columbia, Canada. We're sorry about this error in typesetting, Ralph, and hope it has not caused you too much delay in receiving letters. And if there are any pals who did not write him because of that, please drop him a note now.

Floy certainly has unique interests—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I would like to get in touch with Pen Pals who have written songs, either the lyrics or the music, because I think we would have a lot in common. I would also like to hear from anyone in your big family who knows how to make artificial fish bait, flies, et cetera. I also wonder if it is possible to find someone interested in making new designs for dress materials, floor coverings, wall paper, et cetera. I am interested in such things and would like very much to hear from anyone who knows how that work is done. My other interests are collecting stamps, reading, and hiking. Here's hoping I hear from someone soon.—Floy Kincaid, Mt. Vernon, Oregon

---

Jane collects in a big way—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I would appreciate it very much if you would please get me lots and lots of Pen Pals from all over the world, especially from foreign countries, although everyone is welcome. I am a French Canadian girl of seventeen and my favorite pastimes are reading, writing and listening to the radio. My hobbies are collecting movie stars' photos and cowboy songs, and I am an ardent stamp collector. I will gladly exchange both stamps and snapshots with all who care to. Friends, both male and female, are welcome, so please don't disappoint me. How about it, pals, are you interested?—Jane De Veaux, c/o Charles De Veaux, Salmon River, Digby County, Nova Scotia, Canada

Robert is a cowboy from out Colorado way—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Would there by any chance be enough range in your Hollow Tree for a lonely southern Colorado cowhand? I am a regular reader of Western Story and enjoy writing letters as well as receiving them. I have ninety hours of college work to my credit and should be able to write a reasonably interesting letter. I am nineteen years old and am very lonesome. I will answer all letters and exchange snapshots, so come one, come all and sling some ink my way.—Robert Rose, R. F. D. No. 1, Trinchera, Colorado

---

Write to these two sisters from "bonnie Scotland"—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Here are two lonely Scotch girls looking for correspondents from all parts of the world. Isobel is eighteen, would appreciate letters from both boys and girls and is fond of dancing, singing and reading. Vi is twenty-five, keen on all outdoor and indoor sports, and collects coins and stamps. She would like girl Pen Pals. We both promise to answer all letters, so come along, Pen Pals, and write to us.—Vi and Isobel Heys, 8 Balfron Road, Oldhall, Paisley, Scotland

---

This CCC boy is interested in flying—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a lonely CCC boy who would appreciate corresponding with Pen Pals from all over. I am Agent Finance Officer of Company 978. I am eighteen years old and my hobby is aviation. I promise to answer all letters.—Joseph Teixeira, Camp Shasta CCC, Dunsmuir, California

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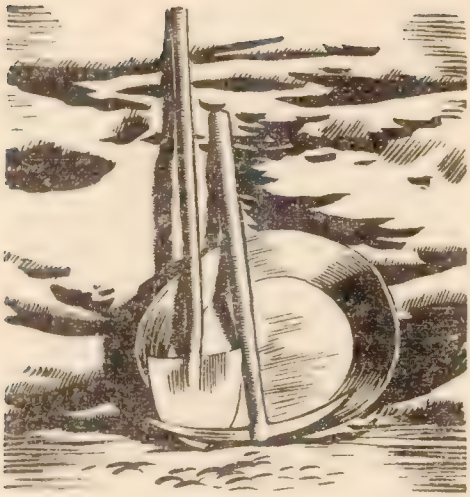
Emma doesn't like city life—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a country girl striving along in the big city, but I'm homesick for country and farm life. I would like to hear from all, eighteen years of age or older, who live on farms or ranches in the Western States. I promise to answer all letters.—Emma Kast, 1519 Lowell Avenue, Springfield, Illinois



Mines and Mining

By J. A. THOMPSON

CLEANING bedrock properly is apt to be one of the most arduous jobs of the small-scale placer miner. Also one of the most satisfactory. The job should be done thoroughly because in most cases it is right on bedrock that the richest gold values will lie. And after a fellow has worked to get the milk out of a pay streak, he doesn't want to be careless when it comes to gathering up the cream.

George K., writing in from Seattle, Washington, asks for a few tips on bedrock cleaning. "Have read lots about almost all angles to placer-gold mining in your department," he says. "But have yet to see any information on cleaning up bedrock. I am a small-scale placer miner myself, but I don't feel like I am doing as good a job as I should when it comes to winding up a placer gravel cut and getting the bedrock gold enrichment. Have you any set of rules for doing this work? Believe the same would be helpful to a lot of others readers besides myself."

It's pretty hard to lay down any rule-of-thumb procedure in mining. Individual circumstances more or less always call for little variations from the book-learning dictum. Exceptions may prove almost as numerous as the rule itself. However, there is one rule that never fails. Two, in fact: Care and common sense.

Keeping this in mind, we can give some general pointers and practical tips on cleaning bedrock that ought to help you out, George, in future operations. First and foremost the importance of the job can't be too strongly emphasized. The success or failure financially of your season's work may depend on how well you clean up the richer bedrock concentrations.

As a rule, after you have shoveled into your sluice boxes or rocker a cut of the pay-streak gravel sufficient to expose a large enough slice of bedrock, the exposed bedrock should be cleaned before taking another cut out of the pay streak. If the bedrock is weathered, partly decomposed and full of cracks and crevices, it may be better to wash several cuts of the pay-streak gravel first, then get after the bedrock as a separate job.

As to the actual procedure, after all loose gravel has been shoveled up and run through the boxes or sluice, grab your pick and if possible get right into the bedrock for at least a depth of six inches or a foot. Wash this surface layer of bedrock through the sluice boxes, too. Don't forget, if any large rocks are left in the cut, to wash them off well before heaving them aside, as clay and dirt sticking to them is very apt to contain some gold.

Where the bedrock is decomposed this practice of picking into it from a half to a foot ought to give you recovery of virtually all the gold.

On the other hand if the bedrock is good, hard, solid rock it is apt to be more difficult and tedious to clean because some of the richer bottom gravel is bound to be left on the bedrock, and any cracks or breaks in the bedrock are apt to carry gold. Sometimes it is in such cracks that the best nuggets lodge.

With this hard, solid bedrock perhaps the best procedure, if water is available, is to wash down the bedrock surface thoroughly with a hose, or in small operations with buckets of water as a floor is rinsed after washing it. When a hose is used to wash down the bedrock, don't have a strong pressure behind it, just enough water to wash the bedrock clean. The loose material missed in shoveling should be washed into a suitable hollow or catch basin at the lower end of the cut where it can be collected and then put through the rocker, or if it is very rich, hand panned.

After this first wash, the bedrock should be scraped and swept, all crevices cleaned out, and then washed a second time. That ought to give you just about all the gold available.

In case you are working on a dry placer, or where water is scarce and at a premium, bedrock can, and should be, cleaned up dry. In doing this, sweep it first with a stiff broom, scrape it, dry clean the crevices, and sweep it again. Then these sweepings can be panned. In dry work, nuggets and large colors should be picked up with a pair of tweezers, if necessary, as they are exposed and found.

As to tools for the work of bedrock cleaning, a lot of miners use what is handy or will serve the purpose, but the most important utensils are: pick and shovel, brooms, and small stiff brushes.

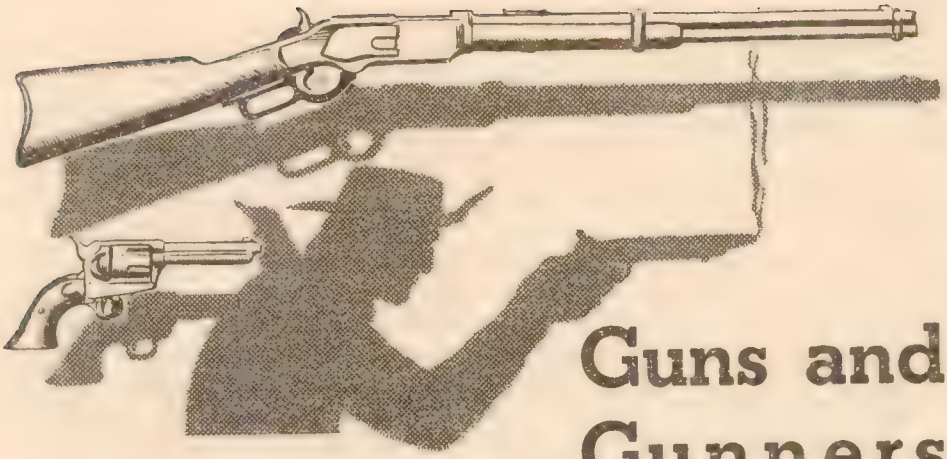
For crevice work the individual's ingenuity comes in. Almost everything has been used for tweezers and scrapers, from ten-cent-store spoons, knives, hunks of old frying pans, and even bent wires for gouging nuggets or gold-bearing dirt out of narrow cracks in the bedrock.

Make a thorough job of it by the best means adaptable to your own particular situation, George, and you won't leave any appreciable gold behind you when you finish with a bedrock clean-up.

To L. T. H., Jacksonville, Florida: The small-scale placer prospectors from all accounts are still doing pretty well up in the mountains of Yuba County, California. More nice nugget finds are still coming in from there; for instance, the seventy-two-dollar nugget that Cliff Johnson panned out not so long ago on Indiana Creek near Dobbins. I heard also of a prospector who hit a fifty-four-dollar piece of yellow metal not so long ago up on Slate Creek in the Howland Flat district.

● We desire to be of real help to our readers. If there is anything you want to know about mining or prospecting, a letter inclosing a stamped and self-addressed envelope sent to J. A. Thompson, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y., will bring a prompt authoritative personal reply.

Letters unaccompanied by a return envelope will be published in the order in which they are received. But as space is limited, please keep such letters as brief as possible.



Guns and Gunners

By PHIL SHARPE

THE hunting season is here, and with it undoubtedly will come the usual series of hunting accidents in the woods.

According to the dictionary, an accident is the result of "chance." Your firearms editor firmly believes that hunting accidents do not just happen—*they are caused!*

Play safe in the woods. Do your part to eliminate the annual toll of hunting accidents.

In making a survey of the various states to determine the causes of hunting accidents, we find that more than fifty percent of them involving the old excuse of "mistaken for game" are the fault of the victims themselves. You cannot hunt with safety wearing inconspicuous clothing. Wear red and plenty of it.

Bright-red clothing does not scare game. Movement and suspicious activities do. Therefore, you stand as much chance of getting your game if you are completely garbed in bright red as you do when your clothing is of a color to blend with the scenery.

The eyesight of wild game is extremely keen. However, deer are color blind and cannot distinguish between red and black. They can see the slightest movement, however, and this frightens them.

In studying accidents, it was surprising to see how many of them occurred to persons wearing only a small quantity of red or none at all. A brown buckskin jacket or khaki clothing looks suspiciously like a deer when hidden in the brush. It invites a bullet.

When you go into the woods, dress with as much red as possible. Never use any white on your clothing. The white-tail deer is the cause of many accidents. An individual hid-

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den in dense growth reaching for a white handkerchief in a hip pocket can easily be mistaken for a white-tail. Red handkerchiefs can be readily obtained. They may not look quite right on the streets of a busy city, but they are excellent life insurance in the woods.

Further analysis of accidents shows that a great many of these are self-inflicted. Self-inflicted accidents invariably are caused by carelessness on the part of the hunter himself. He trusts to safeties which are not safe. He undertakes very foolish experiments. It is purely an experiment when you stand a loaded rifle or shotgun up against a tree and then sit down on a nearby log for a brief rest. It doesn't take much to knock the gun down; sometimes the wind will do it. And often you do not even need wind. Should the rifle fall and become discharged with the muzzle headed in your direction, the results are certain to be disastrous. Why not lay the gun down while you are resting?

Another precaution: never walk through the woods with your finger on the trigger. You might stumble.

Climbing through or over fences with a loaded gun is also another possible source of serious accident. Many a hunter finds it necessary to go through or over such an obstruction. It is wise first to unload the gun, reach through or under the fence, and lay the gun flat on the ground on the opposite side. Then move down the fence some ten or twenty feet, climb through or over, and return to pick up the gun and reload it. If you do it in this fashion, you'll never have an accident. Try to stand the gun against a rickety fence while you pass through or over and it will probably fall down. Even if it does not discharge you are liable to seriously damage it.

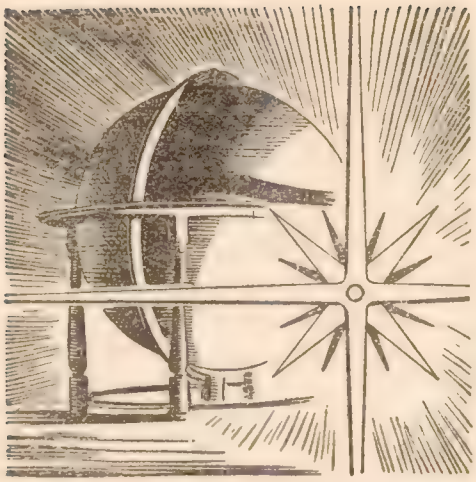
Do not shoot at any object unless you are certain as to what it may be. You may not think it possible that one might mistake a human being for other than large game, but this often occurs as the survey recently conducted clearly shows. Two fatal accidents investigated by authorities in Ohio show that the persons inflicting them gave the excuse that they thought the victims were squirrels. In both cases, the victim was wearing gray clothing and the hunter was after squirrels.

Human life is worth more than a shot at game. Take no chances. When you see game, look before you shoot. Then look again to make sure you were right the first time. We all make mistakes in the woods which are frequently not disastrous. Many a man has shot at a black spot on a stump, thinking it was game until he investigated to see what the effects of his shot happened to be.

Take no chances! Do your part to protect the other fellow and you protect yourself. It's just common sense.

If you are interested in making a cartridge collection and would like to hear from other collectors, write to this department, inclosing a three-cent stamp for a list of names which will be sent to you as soon as it is compiled. In this way you may be able to trade some of your duplicates with others for something you really need for your collection.

This department has been designed to be of practical service to those who are interested in guns. Mr. Sharpe will gladly answer any question you may have concerning firearms. Just address your inquiries to Phil Sharpe, Guns And Gunners Department, Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. *Be sure you inclose a three-cent stamp for your reply. Do not send a return envelope.*



Where to go and how to get there

By JOHN NORTH

In the fall the hunter and camper gets his old bear gun and deer gun out for an oiling, stows the camp gear in the trailer and heads for the tall timber.

George B., of Cincinnati, asks, "Could you give me any information about the Old Cariboo Road up in the Northwest? I understand that there is very good hunting and camping ground up there, and the section is filled with relics of the old days, which would interest our party almost as much as the natural scenic beauty. Can the country up there be penetrated by campers, and is it worth taking a chance on for a fall trip?"

The answer, George is, "yes," to all your questions. The trip should well repay you for the time you spend on it since the country is well worth seeing from the scenic standpoint, as well as being chock full of game and history as well.

I would suggest that after you tour Washington and end that part of your trip in Seattle, you go over to Vancouver and look around there a few days before heading on up the trail.

The road up from Vancouver leads closely along the Frazer River to the point where it joins with the Thompson River. It then follows along the Thompson for something like fifty miles. Here it cuts through the uplands for a distance, then meanders back down to the Frazer River at another point. From then on as far as Prince George it follows along the Frazer.

About a hundred miles on this road from Vancouver, you will run into the hamlet of Hope, beyond which there is another seventy miles of some of the most attractive country for camping you will want to see anywhere.

It will probably interest you to know that the town of Hope was built originally as a small depot for the Hudson's Bay Co. At the trading post here, the trappers used to bring in their pelts, take out their money and trade goods and celebrate for a few days before hitting the woods again. It was built about 1847.

About ten years later somebody discovered gold and men came up the Frazer River as far as Hope,

If you too are interested in learning more about Central British Columbia, write to John North, inclosing a stamped, self-addressed envelope, and illustrated booklets and descriptive literature will be mailed you free.

where they disembarked and went inland with their grubstakes.

If you make a trip to this Cariboo Road country, George, you will be in a land whose compelling beauty will make you gasp for breath. When you go up there to pitch your camp you will find a place which you can leave only with regret.

While we are in the Canadian Northwest, we will answer a request from Arthur J., of Detroit, who wants to know what chances a man with limited means has to settle in western Canada. He is interested in the area between the Rockies and Prince Rupert.

Well, Arthur, I can tell you right off that this area which you mention offers mighty fine opportunity for mixed farming to the man and his family who are seeking independence on their own farm. No other area in British Columbia offers such a combination of advantages so attractive to the settler with limited capital. The various districts combine fertility of soil, a rapid growing season, moderate and healthful climate, fine hunting and fishing, timber for fuel, fences and building material.

This territory is particularly adapted to mixed farming. Soil and climate are favorable to the growing of wheat, coarse grains and grasses. Livestock thrives on the forage crops of this area, and there is plenty of shelter and water for them when they are turned out to shift for their own food, which is important in cutting the cost of feeding.

Several of the hardier fruits are raised in this district, and fine crops of strawberries are produced. The growing season is particularly rapid on account of the fact that they have such long days. This makes plants mature more rapidly than they do in the more southerly areas.

The temperature in summer very rarely goes higher than 85 to 90 degrees, and the short nights are usually very cool, so you can get a good pleasant rest after your day's work. In winter there are a few cold snaps, but they usually don't last very long. It is very rarely that they have anything like blizzards or bad electrical storms.

Another important factor in selecting a farm is water, and in this district you will find many of the farms located on open streams, which usually means that besides the ample supply of stock water you can find water for wells at a very shallow depth, cutting the expense of digging or drilling to practically nothing. Those farms without open water can usually strike it digging or drilling at anywhere from ten feet to not more than fifty.

A newcomer with little money should stand a fine chance here to find himself a good home and grow up with the community, Arthur, so I advise you to look into it very seriously.

● We aim to give practical help to readers. Mr. North will be glad to answer specific questions about the West, its ranches, homestead lands, mountains and plains, as well as the facts about any features of Western life. He will tell you also how to reach the particular place in which you are interested. Don't hesitate to write to him, for he is always glad to assist you to the best of his ability. Be sure to inclose a stamped envelope for your reply.

Address all communications to John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

PART FOUR

IRON MALEMUTE

By FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

The Story So Far:

Stricken with a serious illness just when he is contemplating the biggest venture of his life, the construction of a railroad in Alaska to Poor Man's Hell, a region rich in minerals, but hopelessly isolated, eighty-year-old Gid Riley puts the job in the hands of young Cal Jessup.

Dogging Cal's footsteps and ready to hinder him in any way possible is Tuck Gorst, Gid Riley's implacable enemy, who intends to take over the railroad when Cal fails to make a go of it. Gorst and his men pre-empt Warm Creek, on which Cal had intended to establish a townsite, but when Gorst sees Cal apparently accepting the situation and building his town on another site, he gives up Warm Creek. Whereupon Cal has skids put under the buildings he has had constructed and moves them across the frozen inlet to Warm Creek, thus winning the first round in the feud.

The construction of the railroad gets under way, but Cal continues to have trouble with Gorst. The latter, with the help of one of his men, starts a snowslide down Bald Mountain, burying one of Cal's pack trains which is carrying dynamite. Caboose Riley, Gid's nephew, and another man are lost in the slide, while Cal who had also been caught in it, frees himself but is peppered with buckshot by Gorst and Schultz who are hiding on the mountainside. Cal's wounds are not serious, but when the pellets are removed they are found to be made of gold.

CHAPTER XIV

AUTOPSY

Cal Jessup examined the gold pellets Doc Hill had removed from his various wounds, turning them over again and again in his hand. There was a puzzled expression on his face.

"You've taken out enough gold to pay your fee, doc," he said. "What do *you* make of it?"

Doc Hill answered with a question of his own. "Ever hear of salting a gold mine by the shotgun method?" he asked. "The salter loads a shell with tiny nuggets instead of shot and blazes away at a rock formation. The gold sticks to the rock and many a sucker spends his last dollar believing he's buying a real mine. Does that suggest anything?"

Cal nodded thoughtfully, a look of comprehension dawning in his eyes. "So," he said softly, "whoever shot me was out to do a little honest mine salting and mixed up the shells. That's very interesting—very interesting indeed!"

"Have you any idea who it was?" asked Doc Hill.

"I'm sure either Bull Shultz or Gorst shot me," Cal answered. "But I can't prove it. And that's the way it'll probably be for weeks to come—accidents happening, crimes committed, but not a lick of proof that a jury would accept. That's the way Gorst has always worked. He's one of the slickest double-crossers I've ever come across."

"I can second that," Doc Hill said, "and I'm a damned sight older than you, son. I imagine they'll salt various ledges, then unload them on suckers. Whenever a railroad opens up a new country it's a field day for the sure-thing boys. They can always say, 'This lode has been known for years, but it wasn't worth developing. Now that the railroad will cut operation costs, it's worth millions over a long period of time.' "

"That's probably it," Cal agreed. "I might even consider something like that myself, say, up on Bear Creek. Well, doc, how soon can I start for Warm Creek?"

"You might go out, flat on your back on a sled," Doc Hill told him. "But if you take my advice, you'll stay quiet a few more days and give your wounds a chance to heal."

"O. K., I'll stay here," Cal answered. He did, but if Doc Hill had vision of his patient resting, he was soon disillusioned. Cal held several

consultations with Hurley, about the drilling at Tunnel, superintended the reorganizing of the pack train, and personally checked on the number of cases of powder that were reclaimed from the slide. He didn't want a steam shovel or plow to strike a case when the grading crew came along. Making allowance for the exploded cases, there were still three missing. Cal ordered warning signs placed on the slide.

Four days after Doc Hill had arrived he and Cal started back for Warm Creek. There was the usual steamer discharging cargo at the wharf. She carried a light locomotive on her forward deck and sailors were rigging blocks and tackle and preparing to swing her to the waiting track. Every steamer that came to Warm Creek in the future would carry at least one car on deck. In this way, when the break-up came, a work train consisting of passenger cars, flat cars, pile driver for bridge work, and several box cars would be ready.

Steam shovels were already on hand. When another cold spell hit, crews took two shovels up the inlet and turned to the land again a mile from Blue Glacier. They left one shovel at the point; then the two crews taking advantage of the packed frozen snow, pushed on some additional miles.

NATHAN LAND hailed this last move with satisfaction. When track laying started he didn't want operations held up at any point, and the steam shovels could work in places where it would be necessary to move the greatest amount of dirt.

Gradually the warehouses were jammed to the eaves with supplies. Gid's old purchasing agent was on the job and he made his selections with care. There wasn't too much of anything when the requirements of the construction work were considered, but Cal was finding his shelters taxed to capacity.

He put men to work building other, and smaller, warehouses—buildings that could readily be later converted into stores. While the foundations for the new buildings were being laid, John Law announced that the inquest on Herb Wise would be held.

Cal immediately notified Doc Hill and the doctor accompanied him to the morgue.

"I'm no doctor," the deputy marshal announced when Cal introduced Doc Hill, "but I can tell when a man's been killed by a bullet."

"Well, my services are available if you need them," Doc Hill told him.

"Thanks," Law answered shortly. "If I need your help I'll sure let out a howl."

With the commissioner's help, Law organized a jury and called the first witness, Bull Shultz. "If he's the only witness they've got," Cal whispered to doc, "I'll know Caboose didn't kill Herb Wise."

Bull Shultz looked gravely and without any uneasiness at the men packed into the place. "I don't think we should go through with this business," he protested. "The man we're sure is guilty is dead. He ain't here to defend hisself, and I don't want to talk again' him."

"Your delicate feelings are worthy of our highest standards of manhood," Cal spoke up with unmistakable sarcasm. "But don't let the fact that Caboose Riley is dead stop you. Speak right out."

"Your remarks are uncalled for, Jessup," John Law said severely.

"I don't agree with you," retorted Cal. "Some of the men who've been here from the beginning know Bull

Shultz for what he is. "I don't want the newcomers to get the idea that he'd balk at hanging a crime on a dead man if it would save his own bacon."

"Damn you, Jessup," John Law shouted, "we're going to have order here. Shultz, keep your seat. Now tell what happened."

Nathan Land who disliked violence of any kind, looked concerned. "I don't like to say it, Cal," he whispered reprovingly, "but I must agree that your remarks were unnecessary and ill-timed."

"Shultz is going to tell a rehearsed story," Cal explained, "and I hoped to get him mad and upset at the start. Maybe he'll get balled up."

The roomful of spectators was quietly attentive as Bull Shultz told his story.

"A party of us took some rails up to Windy Gap and started layin' 'em on the snow," Shultz declared. "Caboose Riley had had a run-in with Herb Wise. To make matters worse some of his pack mules broke loose, and he was havin' a hard time roundin' 'em up. Herb Wise said he didn't want Caboose, Cal Jessup or any of the new railroad outfit around. He said he reckoned he'd go help the kid round up his mules, and get him started out of the country. He took a rifle and started off to the south, hopin' to get below the mules and drive 'em north."

"Where were you at that time?" John Law asked.

"Layin' rails," answered Shultz. "We'd finished the job and was startin' back for Glacier Inlet when we heard a rifle shot. There was a delay of three, four minutes, then two more shots followed. After a while we saw Caboose comin' out of a draw —the same one where Wise's body was found. A couple of mules was gallopin' ahead of him, and at the time we figgered he'd shot and kicked up the dirt at the mules' heels to put a scare into 'em."

JOHN LAW and the commissioner put a few further questions to Shultz, then asked if anyone in the crowd, or a friend of Caboose cared to testify. The commissioner looked over at Dan Riley inquiringly.

"No questions," said Dan.

Doc Hill leaned over toward Bull Shultz. "Mr. Shultz," he asked politely, "you are positive that three shots were fired, and that Herb Wise and Caboose were the only men in that gulch?"

"Oh, yes," Shultz answered confidently.

"The shots came within, say, five minutes of each other?" doc inquired.

"They did.",

"That's all," said doc.

Shultz left the stand looking puzzled, and John Law called Cal Jessup. Cal's testimony was hearsay, admissable only because the accused man was dead.

"Caboose told me Herb Wise attacked him," Cal explained. "They exchanged not three but several shots. Caboose said that Wise fired the last shot. Now, if Caboose's bullet killed Wise, how could Wise fire the last shot."

"Suppose we examine the remains," doc suggested. "I'll tell you immediately which of the shots killed Herb Wise."

An interested group watched Doc Hill perform an autopsy on Herb Wise's remains. Two bullets that had entered the breast were removed and given to John Law.

"These should be sealed and placed in your safe, Mr. Deputy Marshal,"

Continued on page 108

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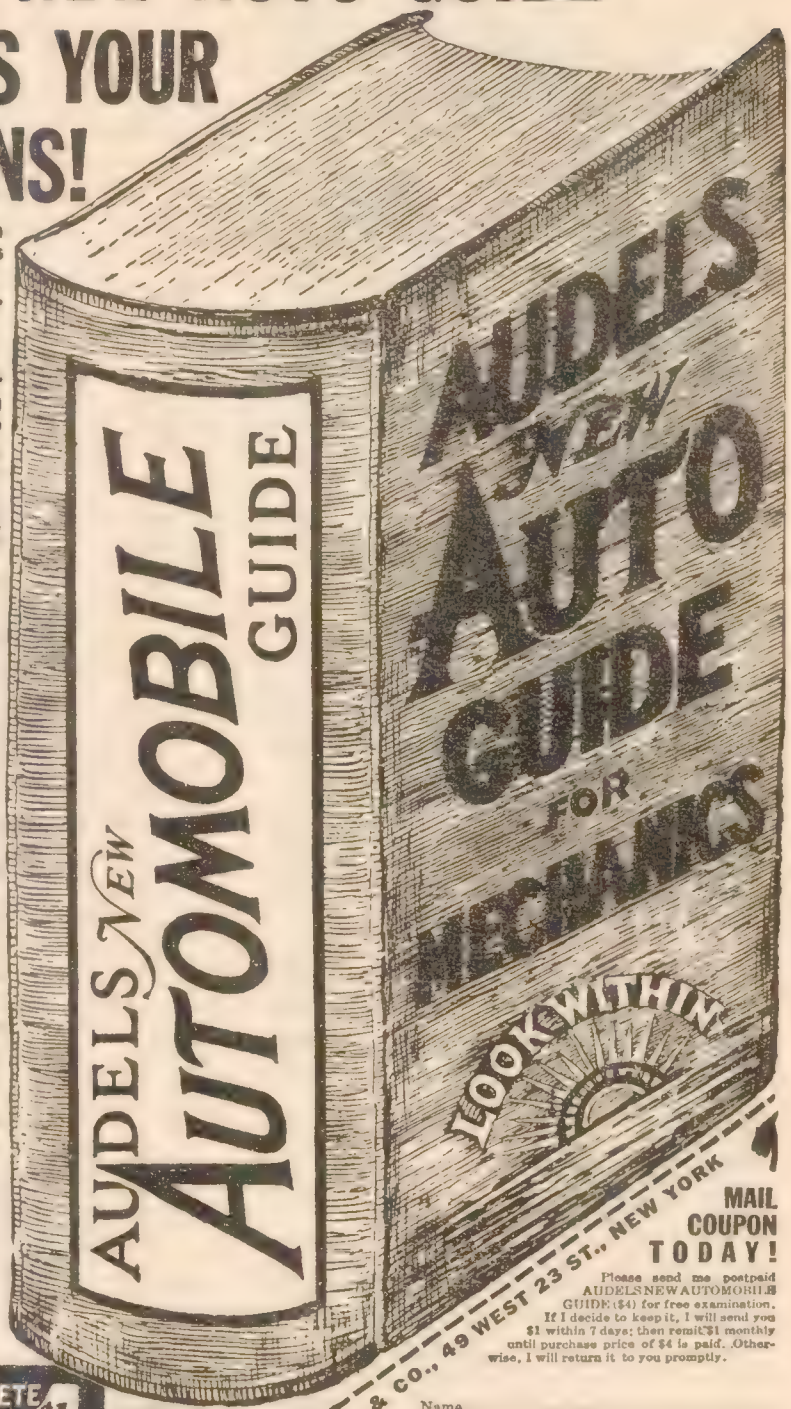

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WILD WEST WEEKLY

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Continued from page 106

doc said. "Either bullet would have caused death within a few minutes. They were fired close to Herb Wise's body." He turned the body over and probed for several minutes without result. "There's no bullet in this wound," he declared.

A murmur ran through the crowd. "Maybe it passed clean through him and was lost," someone suggested.

Doc snorted. "If that bullet passed through him, it emerged without leaving a mark." He challenged anyone to argue the point. The silence was so thick it could have been cut with a cheese knife. "Therefore," Doc Hill continued after a pause, "the bullet entering Herb Wise's back was removed. By whom, I haven't the remotest idea. But it's a fact."

He sat down and the silence held for several seconds. Then the room buzzed with conversation.

"May I look at those wounds?" Dan Riley inquired finally.

"Of course," John Law told him. The room grew silent again while Dan studied the wounds. Then he stepped back. There was an odd expression on his face. His eyes met Cal Jessup's, but betrayed nothing.

The coroner's jury retired and considerable argument ensued. Eventually it returned a verdict—death at the hands of Pat (Caboose) Riley, deceased.

"That's an unjust verdict," Dan Riley declared hotly. "No man should be convicted without an opportunity to defend himself."

He walked from the room, and when Cal followed and attempted to express his sympathy, Dan turned savagely. "Haven't you done enough to our family already?" he demanded and stalked away.

Doc Hill joined Cal and they walked back to the company headquarters. "There's something about this case that I don't understand,

Cal," doc said. "You'll notice I examined those bullets under a microscope. Well, they came from Caboose's rifle, both of them. That's just between us, of course." He started to say something more, thought better of it, then dismissed the matter with a terse, "I don't suppose the case ever will be cleared up."

"Not unless Bull Shultz talks," Cal answered. "I've got a railroad to build, but doc, I'm sure going to keep this in my mind as unfinished business."

CHAPTER XV

DIRT FLIES

A WARM wind, burdened with rain, came out of the southwest and poured torrents of water on the Glacier Inlet country. Men in hip boots going about their business in Warm Creek churned the mud until the streets were knee-deep. Merchants were kept busy sweeping mud from the sidewalks in front of their establishments, but they made little headway.

Cal sat in his office, listened to the steady downpour and studied a set of figures the bookkeeper had just given him. A tremendous stream of money had poured into the country and Cal wondered where it had all gone. Weeks had passed since the inquest, and much had been done, yet the visible results hardly seemed to justify the cash outlay.

"Don't worry," Nathan Land advised when Cal mentioned his doubts. As usual, the engineer was a steadying influence. "Don't ever worry in this business. Most people only see the moving trains. They don't realize the money that has gone into the roadbed."

"I suppose you're right," Cal conceded, "but it doesn't seem that old Gid is getting value received."

"Let's count the blessings," suggested Nathan. "First, the portable mill has stacks of tie scattered from Glacier Inlet to Windy Gap. And they're cutting ties on the other side of the Gap. Steam shovels have been moving dirt as fast as it thawed and could be handled. The lads at Tunnel are ahead of schedule. You've a town in running order; a complete work train in the yards ready to move as soon as the track laying starts and—but isn't that enough?"

"I suppose so," Cal admitted.

The rain, having taken off the snow all the way to Tunnel, ended and was followed by sunshine. The track-layers moved out of town and proceeded slowly along the inlet. Every mile put under track cut down the cost of advance operations proportionately. Old-timers who had lived up nearby creeks and rivers, and who preferred moving supplies in a boat to mushing them over the ice, began to appear, some of them following the ice to tidewaters.

They bought fresh vegetables, ate civilized food, drank, gambled, and danced with the girls at the Blue Moon. These rites achieved, they then stood around staring at the rails and the puffing, snorting iron malemute. Thus far they had regarded the railroad as something "bound to come in time— But not in *my* time." And there it was, coming in their time, after all.

Cal formed the habit of looking in on Marcia when he was dog-tired and wanted a change. Invariably she dropped whatever she was doing and devoted herself to cheering him up. "What's the news?" he asked one night after returning from a horseback trip to Tunnel.

"The last steamer brought in a Mr. Sharon," Marcia answered.

"He's supposed to be interested in mining. He talked to a lot of old sourdoughs who came in recently. Then he went into conference with Tuck Gorst. Gorst is supposed to have staked out low-grade claims on one of the creeks. I've seen so much trickery and deceit since I've been here I'm becoming suspicious. I've come to the conclusion that Mr. Sharon's supposed interest in mining claims is a blind. I think he's up to something else."

"Did he talk with Dan Riley, too?" Cal inquired.

"Now that I think of it," the girl replied, "I don't believe Gorst introduce Mr. Sharon to Dan. You know, Cal," Marcia added thoughtfully, "Dan has changed since Caboose's death. I've got to know him pretty well. He's been coming here a lot recently."

"Here?" Cal asked with some surprise. "I thought he considered the Blue Moon a den of vice."

"Dan is revising many of the opinions he formed too quickly," Marcia explained. "He told me one night I was doing good work and deserved every dollar I took in. He said the atmosphere was homelike and a man needed it when he was sad and discouraged."

"Well, I'll be damned," Cal muttered.

"He's won my interest, Cal," Marcia continued. "He seems to be groping, unable to find himself. I'm going to help him if I can."

"Of course, but still—" Cal looked at her, suddenly seeing not a loyal comrade, but a girl whose beauty was strangely disturbing. "Damn it, Marcia," he exclaimed. I've been taking you too much for granted. I know how Dan feels, and why he comes here. You buck a man up. We're a selfish bunch, taking from you and giving you nothing."

"Cal, you and the others have given me everything," Marcia declared. "I'm the one who can't show my appreciation. If ever there's anything I can do, let me know. I'm with this venture of yours, sink or swim."

CAL left Marcia that night not only feeling better, but speculating on his own emotions. When a man found himself thinking more and more of a girl, it might become a serious problem, especially if the man had a railroad to build.

The locomotive, puffing heavily, crossed the street and moved up the inlet, pushing several flat cars loaded with rails. In the distance Cal could hear a steam shovel working. And somewhere far up the line, a pile driver was building a bridge to span one of the numerous small creeks. The rasp of the exhaust as the engine lifted the hammer, then the impact of hammer against wood came sharply, clearly on the still air. Absent-mindedly, Cal slapped at something biting his neck, then looked at his fingers. He had killed his first mosquito. Time was getting on.

Day followed day in swift succession. Dirt was flying everywhere; the job was running smoothly. "Too smoothly," Cal decided. "Something's about due to crack. Gorst isn't loafing around, sucking his thumb."

The next steamer brought a letter from Gid Riley. The old fellow didn't write often, but when he did take the trouble either to scrawl a few words, or dictate them to a stenographer, he had something to say. This note was brief:

DEAR CAL:

If you're any good at all, you should have trained men capable of running the job while your back's turned.

One of my deals hasn't panned out, and

I've got to raise money to keep the construction going. We can't lose a single day if we're to run trains by February 1st. Therefore I want you to come down and tell my bankers what's going on up there.

Yours truly,

GID RILEY.

P. S. If something develops and you can't leave, make out a report. But they would rather talk to you in person.

"It looks like a trip Outside," Cal said to Nathan Land late that night. "And that's something I wasn't figuring on. I'll be gone two weeks at the very least, and maybe longer."

"As far as the engineering goes," Nathan answered, "I can keep the dirt flying. But if trouble should develop, I wouldn't be much good."

"I'm wondering if Gid has to get this loan to meet the next pay roll," Cal said speculatively. "If the ghost doesn't walk regularly, there'll be trouble." He stiffened as he heard a sound. "Say, what was that?"

"Sounded like a knock on the door," Nathan answered. "Wonder who's prowling around this time of the night. Decent people should be in bed. See who it is."

Cal opened the door and looked out. He saw three men walking down the street. The middle one, a slim man, staggered along weakly as though drunk. "Want any help?" Cal shouted.

"No, just taking a drunk pardner home," a deep voice answered.

"I ain't drunk," one of the men said querulously. "I'd like to be, but I ain't. Why didn't you let me talk to Jessup? I'd like to see the cuss who's buildin' this road."

"Mr. Jessup is in an important conference with his chief engineer," the deep-voiced man answered, glancing back uneasily at the door Cal had just closed.

A lone man was walking on the opposite side of the street. "Hello, Mr. Gorst," he called. "Need some help?"

"No," Gorst answered. "Just

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helpin' one of the boys home. He's full."

GORST kept his two companions moving down back alleys until he reached Bull Shultz's cabin. He knocked and said to one, "Wait outside a minute." Then he opened the door, thrust the slender man inside and closed the door swiftly. He sprang to Bull Shultz's side and clapped his hand over the man's mouth.

"Don't yell," he warned hoarsely. "I didn't, and I was just as surprised as you are."

"Well, I'll be damned!" Shultz exclaimed. "It's Caboose Riley, isn't it?"

"Yes. A prospector just brought him in. He was actually knocking on Jessup's door," Gorst explained. "If I hadn't been doing a little eavesdropping, I'd have missed him."

"What's the matter with him? Why don't he talk?" Shultz was staring steadily at Caboose, but there was no recognition in the latter's dull, apparently unseeing eyes. "Crazy as a loon, isn't he?"

"I think so," Gorst answered. "Look at that scar on his head. He must've gotten it in the slide."

"Doc Hill should look at it," Shultz said without thinking. "Maybe there's a pressure on the brain."

"You're crazy to suggest taking him to Doc Hill," Gorst said scornfully. "We've got to get him to some institution—or sink him in the inlet."

"Sink him in the inlet if we won't get caught," Shultz agreed callously, "but it's pretty risky. There's been a lot of talk goin' around about me puttin' a plug in the *Narada's* crownsheet. An' a lot of folks don't believe Caboose killed Herb Wise. They're lookin' at me kind o' funny. Well, Gorst, I don't want any more fingers of suspicion pointin' my way.

First thing I know them fingers will be clutchin' me. I ain't for drownin' this feller if there's a chance of gettin' caught."

"We've got to keep him under cover until we make up our minds what's to be done," Gorst said. "I'll take him into the back room, and you invite the fellow that brought him to have a drink. Get him blind-drunk, then turn him loose."

Shultz obeyed. The man was ready enough to accept the invitation. He was a typical prospector and trapper. By taking a little dust out each summer and trapping furs in the winter, he managed to make ends meet and had a little extra left for the poke.

"My dogs found that cuss," the prospector told Shultz. "I knowed they smelt somethin' different. Could tell by their howls. I went out, and there was this feller wanderin' round. Blood had froze around the wound and his feet was froze stiff. I put his feet in coal oil to draw out the frost. The pain must've been somethin' terrible, but he didn't notice it. Then I was sure he was crazy."

"What do you think happened?" Shultz asked.

"Fell over a cliff or somethin' and gashed his head," declared the man. "It drove him crazy, and he just wandered. That's how I'd figure it."

"Poor devil," Shultz said. "Well, we'll take care of him. Have another drink."

"Don't care if I do," said the miner. He gulped down a tumbler of straight whiskey. "I fixed up this feller's head and tried to find out somethin' about him, but all he said was, 'Where's Cal? Where's Cal?'" He poured himself another drink. "He couldn't've been talkin' about Cal Jessup, could he?"

"Hell, no," said Shultz. "I've been here from the beginning and I'd've seen him around if he'd been one of Jessup's boys. No, he's just crazy. Take another drink. You don't get stuff like that often."

"Can't say I do," the other agreed thickly. He passed out after drinking the best part of a bottle, and Gorst sent for two of his men. He ordered them to follow the miner, take him down to the steamer and drop him through a coal-bunker hole. If he survived that, at least he wouldn't be around to tell about the young man with the gashed head whom his dogs had found.

"Where's Cal?" Caboose asked thickly, as Gorst was giving his orders.

"There's one thing I can't understand," said Gorst. "How did Caboose work out of the slide without being seen?"

"He might've worked his way out of some air pocket under the snow at night. Then he wandered. It must've been twenty-five miles from the slide to the trapper's cabin," Shultz said. "He's located near the headwaters of Lowell Creek."

"I guess that's the answer," said Gorst. "Now, Shultz, here's the play: You've got to keep Caboose here. When the coast is clear I'll dump him into the inlet, as long as you don't want the job. Keep him guarded, and, above all, don't let him see a familiar face, or he may get his memory back and that might not be good for you. He might even clear himself of the murder charge and hang it on you!"

CHAPTER XVI

A CHANGE IN PLANS

CAL JESSUP had his bag packed, had given final instructions to his various assistants, and was spending his last few minutes with Marcia

when an incoming steamer whistled. She proved to be one of the regular Alaskan liners and she tied up alongside the steamer that would take Cal to Seattle. Mail, fresh vegetables and several tons of equipment were transferred to the wharf, then the steamer backed into the stream, turned and resumed her voyage.

Cal followed the mail to the post office and the postmaster hastily sorted out several letters and gave them to him. There was one from Gid Riley and Cal read it first.

He read:

DEAR CAL:

A tinhorn stock market trader has circulated the rumor that we'll never build the road because Gorst holds the right of way through Windy Cap. Bankers insist that stretch through the Gap be laid before considering a loan. Can you do this?

GID RILEY.

Cal scrawled on the bottom, "Can do! Will do! Cal." He put the letter into an envelope addressed to Gid Riley and carried it to the purser of the southbound steamer. "Cancel my reservation," he said, "and take this instead." Then he went back to the office.

Nathan Land looked amazed but resigned when Cal returned. He listened while Cal outlined the contents of the letter. "Do you think you can do it?" he asked.

"We've got several drays," Cal answered. "We can work out some way of handling the rails. It's just a question of hooking on enough horses to move the loaded drays."

"You'll have to use some of the pack mules in harness," Nathan said dubiously. "They'll get indignant and kick hell out of things."

"Then we'll work 'em over with a club," Cal declared. "There're some bad creeks to ford, too."

"And Squaw River," added Nathan. "It's too bad the pile-driving crew isn't that far along."

"We'll swim the horses," Cal decided, "and raft the rails and drays. There'll be no end of grief and expense, but we've got to go through with it."

Cal put in two days selecting men and equipment, then he loaded everything onto the work train and moved to the end of steel. Horses, mules, and men wallowed in knee-deep muck. It wasn't an encouraging start.

As soon as the drays and rails began to move eastward, Cal organized a small pack train and headed for Squaw River. He saw many spots along the way where the drays would get stuck and possibly turn over. But if his men were any good, they could get through.

With his own small crew, Cal searched the bank of Squaw River for the largest and driest trees. He found several dead ones, felled and then floated them down to the point of crossing.

With the logs they built a big raft, spanned the stream with a heavy rope, then rigged tackle so the raft could be shifted and the current put to work moving it from bank to bank. Small ferryboats were operated in a similar manner.

AS soon as this job was finished, Cal and his crew went back to give the draymen a hand. They needed it. Tempers were on edge, men, animals and equipment covered with muck, and on top of that swarms of mosquitoes were making life miserable for everyone.

The insects drove the animals frantic. Cal rubbed down a mule's rump and crushed so many mos-

Continued on page 116

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Continued from page 114

quitoes his glove was tinged with the blood squashed out of them.

"At first when the animals fell down and got all over mud," a driver told Cal, "we figgered it was hard luck. But at least the mud keeps the mosquitoes off, so now we smear it on 'em. Trouble is, it cakes, dries out and falls off, and the blasted insects come at 'em again."

"Have you tried building smudges when you stop?" Cal asked.

"Smudges?" the man said cynically. "Why, as soon as mosquitoes see smoke they pass the word some poor devil is smudgin' mosquitoes, and they come from miles around. These here damn mosquitoes are crazy about smudges."

After a week's hard work, the drays arrived at the raft. Ferrying everything across was the easiest part of the job, much easier than fording small creeks with steep banks. Floating ice, however, gave Cal some tense moments. One clean hit by a berg would take raft and load downstream and smash it up in the rapids.

The trek from Squaw River to Tunnel was easier, for this ground was higher and there was less muck. Then, too, a wind, sweeping down from the mountains, blew the mosquitoes away. The drays were only three miles behind Cal when he arrived at Tunnel. Pat Hurley was on hand to greet him.

"Come here and lemme show you somethin', Cal," Hurley said as they shook hands. He led the way into the bore. "Look, daylight! We're through! It ain't much of a hole, but you're lookin' at Caribou Valley."

"How long will it take you to blast a hole big enough for a team of mules and a dray to pass through?" Cal asked.

"Three or four days in a pinch," answered Hurley. "But the driver'd have to duck his head."

"Do it," Cal ordered. "I'd planned to swamp a trail over the ridge."

"What's goin' on up Windy Gap way," Hurley asked curiously. "Is there a bit of a brawl a-brewin' up there?"

"Why?"

"Well, first you bring in rails the hardest and costliest way," Hurley answered. "Second, quite a few Gorst lads have passed through. Gorst hisself, Bull Shultz, an' that damned traitor, Dan Riley."

"I think Dan's all right," Cal interrupted. "He's just trying to show old Gid he's man-sized."

"Well, he's along, and so're plenty of others," Hurley declared. "And a hard crew of human apes they are, except Dan. It wouldn't surprise me if some of 'em had growed thumbs on their feet."

WHILE the animals and some of the men were getting a badly needed rest pending the opening of the tunnel, Cal and several other men followed the right of way to Windy Gap.

Grade stakes moved straight to the snowline. Longer stakes had been driven through the snow and into frozen ground to mark the right of way. These stakes passed within three feet of the rails Tuck Gorst had laid in the snow. The snow had settled considerably, and the ties and rails were almost out of sight. But they were there, nevertheless, and Gorst was relying on them heavily. He felt the law was on his side, and he was prepared to go the limit, no holds barred.

When Cal and his party arrived Gorst came out of the cabin Herb Wise had once occupied. "I'm warning you not to lay your steel through the Gap," Gorst told Cal. "Your grade stakes are too close to my rails now."

"If it'll make you feel any better," Cal retorted, "I'll run my line a little nearer the cabin."

"You can't do that," Gorst pointed out. "This is my property. I bought it from Wise's estate."

"Then I'll stick to my grade stakes as they are driven," Cal declared.

"The minute you place a tie in the Gap, the battle's on," Gorst warned.

"Then it'll be on," agreed Cal.

Since there was nothing for Cal to do but wait until the drays arrived, he decided to make a quick ride on to Icy Lake. There a comforting sight greeted him. Not only did grade stakes run all the way to the lake, but the portable sawmill crew had left large piles of ties along the way.

The crew amazed Cal. He had given the boys the order to cut ties, and they had cut them. In the months they had been in the field he had not issued a second order. Monthly, they sent one of their number to take care of their pay. The messenger sent the pay as instructed, to their families Outside, and brought the remainder back to camp with him, along with the items his companions had ordered at the camp commissary. Regularly, Cal had sent them mail and supplies.

He thought the crew might be at the west end of the lake, but all he found there was a heap of sawdust, a pile of empty tin cans that had marked the cookhouse, and rings of rocks that marked tent sites. The men, having finished work there, had moved on without waiting for more orders.

Grade stakes followed the southerly shore line and disappeared

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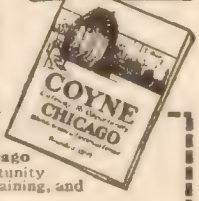

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around a bend. Cal had brought a camera along and he took pictures of the lake and grade stakes. He planned to take other photographs of Windy Gap, with rails laid through the all-important notch. Good photographs should prove more eloquent than words to convince Gid Riley's bankers that a loan would be safe.

When he returned to the Gap, Cal found the rails on the site, the men camped, rested and eager for battle. Cal had purposely selected men who had tasted defeat at the hands of Gorst's men during the fight for the townsite.

They said little when Cal announced, "We start work in the morning." But there were knowing grins. Few picks would be needed in the morning's operations, but every man had a pick handle ready.

CAL'S men got up early, but Gorst's men were around even earlier. Breakfast was eaten, smokes enjoyed, then Cal slipped the lines around his shoulders, cracked a whip and horses began pulling a scraper.

Cal dumped the dirt into a hole and continued on, getting nearer and nearer the big drift that choked the pass. He caught up a mass of material that was half snow and half ice, turned the horses around and started back. Dumping the load at a convenient spot, he returned again.

An hour passed before Cal retached Gorst's rails. By that time there were several scrapers working. When they were within three feet of the rails, Gorst came down and stood on his short length of track. "I'll kill the first man who touches these rails," he shouted.

"Oh, no, you won't," Cal answered. "In the first place, there isn't a gun in my bunch. And you aren't going to be foolish enough to kill unarmed men. The bunch down at Warm Creek would string you up for that, and you know it. If you

think you've got a remedy, go to law. You can collect damages and toss me out of the Gap *if* you can prove your case, Gorst. Keep those scrapers going," he added to his men in a commanding tone.

"This bunch of rails is in the way," one of them said. "We should drag 'em clear out. First thing we know they'll slide into the cut and men'll get hurt."

"Drag 'em away, then," Cal ordered.

Several teams were hitched to a long, heavy chain carrying a hook in the end. Every man knew what was coming. Cal's men would take a couple of turns around the rails and ties, crack the whip and snake rails, ties and a goodly amount of snow out of the Gap and onto hard ground some distance below the big drift.

They had the chain lined out nicely when Nathan Land galloped up. He looked worried and excited. "Come here, Cal," he said, "there's a problem developed down the line that needs your decision."

"Hold everything," Cal told his men. He drew the engineer aside and said, "What's up, Nathan?"

"Gorst's men are spreading reports the Riley Construction Co. is insolvent and that the boys needn't expect the ghost to walk next pay day," Nathan explained. "You'd better hurry things along here before the word comes. The boys at Tunnel have the news already."

"Thanks for tipping me off," Cal answered. "You're just in time for a free-for-all, I think."

"You forget I'm not a fighting man," Nathan answered. "I'll be glad to give you some sound, engineering counsel, however. May I suggest that the snow on this end of the track is loose, because of your scraping. Whereas the snow between the rails is hard enough to support the weight of many men."

"And is supporting that weight," Cal said, nodding toward the Gorst men massing to defend the track.

"That's right. Just keep the tracks moving fast once you break them from the packed snow. By the way, if I drive the horses that will leave the driver free to throw punches."

"He isn't a punch thrower," Cal explained with a grin, "he kicks, bites, and makes free use of his knees in close quarters. A very handy man to have on your side. You take over the horses and he'll be tickled to death." Keenly aware of what was on, the Gorst crowd was waiting tensely. "Come on, boys," Cal shouted, "let's snake those rails out of the way!"

From the Gorst mob, a single man began working his way toward the new driver, determined to do battle. It was Dan Riley. "Nathan Land," he growled. "Now there's a man I should be able to lick. He isn't a fighter. He's an engineer. I need one good knockout to restore my confidence."

CHAPTER XVII

HOLE ACE

CAL, grasping a pick handle and flanked by a pair of lusty bouncers he had imported from Seattle's Skidroad, led a flying wedge. Somehow Cal managed to survive the first clash, though both of his flankers went down. Each hauled an enemy with him, however, and four men wallowed in the snow, slugged, kneed and chawed. It was no place for any man who wasn't ready to take all he might be given. The pressure behind, as men tried to get into the fight, forced Cal halfway up the track. He tried to fight

his way through to Gorst, but a bear-sized man blocked his way.

The man made a vicious swipe with a pick handle that would have driven Cal's head into his shoulders had it connected. Cal knocked the blow aside, then being smaller and faster, fetched a sideswipe that glazed the man's eyes and mashed an ear. With a tired sigh the fellow rolled into the hole the scrapers had dug.

Standing five or six feet above the Riley Construction Co. men, the Gorst crowd had a big edge. Cal squirmed back through the struggling men, picked up the chain and carried it to the end of the rails.

A dozen Riley men placed their hands on their knees and let their partners climb over their backs. Enough gained a foothold to push the Gorst men back several feet. Cal took several turns around the rails and nearest tie, then yelled, "Take it away, Nathan."

But Nathan was otherwise occupied, for Dan Riley was rushing him. Nathan had knocked a pick handle out of Dan's hand, but had lost his own through sheer violence of the swing. Now, to avoid breaking his glasses and possible injury to his eyes, he retreated a few feet, hastily placed his glasses in their case and thrust the case into his pocket.

"Damn it," he growled. "I'd like to knock the cockiness out of this fellow."

Without glasses, Dan became a vague blur to Nathan—advancing and retreating, and occasionally giving violent blows which shook the engineer to his very foundation. Dan's fist glanced off Nathan's cheek bone, then sank deep into his stomach. It made Nathan sick. It also made him angrier. He always seemed to see the blows coming too late to avoid them.

Suddenly Nathan rushed Dan and got his arms about him. To his surprise he realized he was Dan's equal in sheer strength. He hadn't spent his years on the frontier for nothing. The trip to Rio Paloma had hardened him. The work on the present job was toughening him.

Dan drove his knee into Nathan's groin. This was the former's first man-to-man fight, and his craftsmanship was poor. Instead of disabling Nathan it aroused his cold fury for the first time, made him actually *want* to fight. He sank his teeth into Dan's arm and then snarled, "So you will eye-gouge, will yuh?" He brought his own knee into action and Dan Riley howled lustily.

Then Nathan saw a chance to drive in a stomach punch and did so. Then his head began spinning from one of Dan's punches. He brought back his elbow and nearly tore two of Dan's ribs from their moorings. He couldn't follow up his momentary advantage, however, and Dan leaped to his feet. And at that moment Nathan heard Cal Jessup bellow, seemingly from a distance, "Take it away, Nathan, what the hell's the matter?"

With a violence that surprised him, Nathan smashed his fist into Dan's face, weathered a flurry of punches, jumped back and drove his boot heel into Dan's stomach. Dan nearly flattened Nathan's nose, but then he went down and stayed down for good.

Nathan staggered to the nearest mule and kicked him. "Giddap! Hi! You blasted shave-tails, giddap!" Harness creaked, chain links rattled, and the mules hit the collar almost in unison. They took up the slack, dug

in, and suddenly the track moved. It fairly shot into the soft snow, and those who had stood on hard snow now found themselves up to their hips, helplessly yanked along between ties and rails.

THE Riley men waded in with clubs and fists. As fast as they finished off a Gorst man, they tossed him aside and went after another. The more stubborn men stood their ground and went down fighting. Others retreated before the storm.

The mules were on the run now. Cal crushed an impulse to fight his way to Gorst and instead chased after the mules. Nathan and Dan Riley were battling again and the former couldn't be bothered with a teamster's duties. Cal brought the mules to a stop two hundred yards from the big drift, turned them around and started back.

He found a mop-up squad chasing the remaining Gorst warriors to the Wise cabin. Tuck Gorst was angrily discussing the battle with one of his men. Presently the latter mounted a fast horse and galloped toward Glacier Inlet.

"He's after John Law," Cal growled to one of his men. "I hope he comes, too. Then we'll clean up this angle of the business for all time."

"But Gorst got his rails down first," a man argued. "John Law will take Gorst's side."

"I'm not entirely sure that is the rule," Cal answered. "I'd want Law to make a decision on the point. In the meantime we'll grade both sides of the big snowdrift, and cut the drift itself down until it's only four feet deep. Plenty of room to waste it beyond the Gap. You'll work long hours, get little sleep, but I'll pay overtime."

The men were puzzled by Cal's subsequent actions. Instead of laying temporary track straight

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through the Gap, he directed them to make a permanent job of it.

They were hard at work when John Law arrived. The deputy marshal talked briefly to Tuck Gorst, then the latter ordered his men to line up. Within sight of the interested Riley men, John Law swore in the entire group, including Gorst, as his special deputies. "You are under my orders from now on," he told them crisply, "and as long as you obey them to the letter, you'll have the United States government back of you."

He led them down to the job. "Jessup," he asked sharply. "How many of your men were in the recent riot?"

"If you call the trimming we gave Gorst's men a riot," Cal answered, "then all of them were, including me."

"If you all engaged in the riot, then," John Law informed them, "you're under arrest. I warn you that I mean business. My deputies are no longer Gorst men, as you term them, but government men."

NOW suppose you keep your shirt on, marshal," Cal said tolerantly. "In the first instance we had a right to put our tracks through here. They tried to stop us, and we fought. In fact, they attacked us."

"Jessup," John Law said sharply, "there's no use trying to talk yourself out of this."

"Well, then, be specific," Cal told him. "You aren't going to arrest any of my men without first stating the charge, are you?"

"Very well," John Law snapped. "You know as well as I do what happened. You're just beating about the bush. First, Mr. Gorst established initial claim to the right of way through the Gap by laying down track ahead of you."

"But Mr. Gorst doesn't intend to build a railroad," Cal argued. "He's

just trying to stop me from building one."

"That's beside the point," John Law retorted. "You have your remedy at law, no doubt. But the first man to lay down rails establishes his claim. Is that clear?"

Cal turned to his men. "Is that clear, boys?" he asked.

"Yes," they yelled, "but we'll fight if you say so, boss."

"Now, Mr. Law," Cal continued. "You're going to stick to that stand, even if you have to spill blood in order to make arrests?"

"You're damned right I am, Jessup," the deputy marshal retorted. He was angry clear through. "You don't seem to realize I mean business. What kind of an officer would I be if I took a stand, then shifted under a little pressure?"

"That's all I wanted to know, John Law," Cal said cheerfully. "You're a man after my own heart. You won't have any trouble with my boys as long as we're given justice. Here's my hand on it."

The deputy marshal shook hands, looking a bit relieved. "I suppose we had better start for Warm Creek," he suggested.

"Just a minute," said Cal. "Boys, get busy and clear away the rest of that big drift. Scrape her right down to gravel."

In solemn procession the scrapers removed the snow. A sharp screeching was heard as the last scraper emerged from the cut. Behind lay two lengths of standard gauge rail. The scraper dumped, returned, and cleared off the parallel rail.

"We laid 'em here last winter before snow began to fly," Cal explained. "While Caboose kept Herb Wise a prisoner in a back room, ground was thawed, ties laid, and rails spiked into place. Then the first blizzard came through and covered it up. The rails Gorst laid mean nothing."

"Damn it, Jessup," John Law said angrily, "you might have told me. You might have told Gorst, also, and saved all this trouble."

"I might have saved this trouble," Cal answered, "and walked into something else. The track was my ace in the hole and I wasn't showing it until you made a ruling."

"I resent your methods," Law snapped. "But my ruling still goes, of course. I play no favorites."

"Now, just a minute there, Law," Gorst protested.

"You'd better calm down, Gorst," Cal advised. "He's going to be just as firm with you as he planned to be with me."

"He can't help hisself," a Riley man shouted.

"You men," John Law said quietly, addressing the men he had appointed special deputies, "will report at once to the marshal's office at Warm Creek and draw your pay for service rendered. That's all."

Gorst hesitated, then with a shrug of his shoulders turned away. Cal knew the battle wasn't won yet. Gorst's attitude was anything but that of defeat. Rather, he was a man who, having failed to take the pot, was waiting for another deal.

CHAPTER XVIII

STAMPEDE

CAL felt no particular elation over winning the right of way through Windy Gap. There was too much potential trouble brewing at Warm Creek and all along the line—rumors of the company's financial troubles, postponed pay days and similar reports. Cal completed the track-laying job, then photographed

it. At least this would dispell any doubts the bankers might entertain that Gorst held the Gap. Then Cal ordered the men back to their several camps, and, with Nathan Land, returned to Warm Creek.

A few minutes after he arrived there was a knock on the office door. Marcia opened it and Cal saw that she looked worried.

"What's the matter, Marcia?" he asked concernedly. "Business gone on the rocks?"

"Business was never better," she declared. "But, listen, Cal, things are happening under the surface. The men believe the report that the Riley Construction Co. has gone broke. They do a lot of talking to the girls, you know, and it all comes back to me. Are you going to skip next pay day?"

"I hope not. We've several thousand dollars in the safe," Cal said, "and there should be more in on the *Narada*. If there isn't, then I'll have to talk the boys into sticking with me awhile longer."

"They won't be talked into it," Marcia warned. "Their confidence in you has been undermined. The whole thing happened so swiftly and spread so rapidly, I'm sure it was organized."

"It probably was," Cal agreed. "Anything else happen?"

"I hate to worry you with this when there's probably nothing in it," she said, "but a man reported that he saw Caboose Riley wandering along the inlet. The man was drunk at the time. The next day when he sobered up, though, he was as positive as ever."

"That's hard to believe," Cal said, amazed. "Although I suppose Caboose could have escaped from the slide and wandered off, out of his head. I'll look into this."

Marcia gave him the name of the man who had spread the report, and Cal searched the saloons and found him—still drunk.

"Sure I saw Caboose," the man said thickly. "And that's why I'm gettin' drunk. It was his ghost I saw, but it was plain as day. It had a voice and it asked, 'Where's Cal?' "

"What did you do?"

"Ran like hell," the man answered. "Then I got to thinkin' maybe it was Caboose. I went back along the inlet, but I couldn't find him."

"Didn't you see his footprints?" Cal asked sharply.

"Nope, couldn't even find my own," was the answer. "Tide had washed 'em away. High tide that night. Hell of a high tide. Just about the biggest tide—"

CAL left him muttering about the tide. The situation was maddening. If Caboose was wandering around, then he should be found immediately before he suffered from exposure. Cal turned in that night, resolved to pull men off the job in the morning and start them searching.

He was awakened by the familiar blast of the *Narada's* whistle. As he came out of the cabin, buttoning up his coat, a dozen of his men crossed the street. Cal knew at least one of them was a Gorst man. He hadn't discharged the fellow because he wanted to keep an eye on him. If he were removed, then Gorst would plant another in his place. The man Cal suspected did no talking. Instead, he seconded every suggestion the leader of the men made.

"Mr. Jessup," the speaker said, "the boys have appointed me to find out if the ghost walks on pay day. We've heard things."

"There should be no delay," Cal answered. He wasn't going to commit himself and then be accused of giving them the run-around. "I expect money on the *Narada*. You know, the shipment has been late once or twice, but you always got your money in the end."

"But this time it's different," the man argued. "Everybody knows some of the big stock brokers have been bearin' down on Gid Riley. He's lost a lot of money the last few months."

"Maybe everybody knows it," Cal said flatly, "but I don't. I'll post a notice, one way or another, about pay day."

"When?" the man insisted.

"Tomorrow morning at eight o'clock," answered Cal.

That didn't entirely satisfy the men and the Gorst spy led the grumbling. But Cal turned away, as if the matter was settled. He boarded the gangplank as soon as it hit the wharf and pushed through the passengers to the purser's office.

"Did the home office ship the pay roll?" he asked anxiously.

"Not a thing this time," the purser told him. "The skipper offered to delay sailing, but the office said it wasn't ready."

Cal emerged from the office and found the space between the warehouse and the edge of the wharf

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black with men. This wasn't unusual, because everyone not at work always hurried to the wharf when the mail steamer arrived. This time, though, the men were silent, their eyes questioning. They expected to find the answer in Cal's face. He summoned a cheerfulness he did not feel, ran down the gangway, grinning broadly. Several hailed him and put questions, but he pretended not to understand, answering them with a friendly wave of the hand.

Shultz and Gorst were on the wharf watching. "I'm bettin' they sent money," Shultz said. "He's ready to go into a clog dance."

"I've learned he can bluff," Gorst said. "We'll see."

Marcia called Cal in as he was passing the Blue Moon. Except for the swampers cleaning up, the place was dead at that hour in the morning. The air was heavy with stale smoke, the odor of spilled liquor mixed with the smoky smell of clothing dried by hot fires, but neither noticed it.

"What luck?" Marcia asked.

"Nothing came. I tried to fool the men on the wharf, but I don't know whether it worked or not," Cal said. "Old Gid must've been hit hard or he'd have raised the pay roll some way."

"I suppose so," she said. "But, Cal, I've had an idea. Couldn't you use what money you have over and over again?"

Cal looked at her tolerantly. "I'm a little dull in the morning, but that would seem to be quite a trick."

"The gamblers and bartenders in the Blue Moon as well as my girls, know the spenders," she explained seriously. "You know, the boys who blow their pay an hour or two after they draw it down. Pay them off first! As fast as the money comes in we'll turn it over to you and you can pay off the next group. The

turn-over will be less and less, of course, as we work from the spenders into the savers. But if you can stop the trouble makers the others may play ball with you."

"It's a bright idea, Marcia," Cal admitted. "But it's got one drawback. I won't take your money."

"Then you haven't faith in the Riley Construction Co.?" Marcia accused.

"All the faith in the world," he said quickly.

"Well, then you haven't a leg to stand on," she said decisively. "If this job's smashed, the Blue Moon is smashed. We swim or sink together. As a cold-blooded business propostion, if not on the basis of friendship, will you try my plan?"

"I suppose so," he said reluctantly.

"I'd rather you accepted it on the basis of friendship," Marcia told him.

"All right, if that's the way you want it," he said. He stood up, then suddenly took her hands. "You're a girl in a million. If you ever go out of my life, well, it'll be a hell of a life."

THAT afternoon Cal posted the names Marcia gave him, and above the list a notice that they would be paid at eight o'clock. At ten o'clock the notice explained, another group of men would be paid. The following noon a third list could get their money.

The men had been paid in groups before, but never in groups including this particular combination of names. The men discussed the matter, but confidence was restored.

That night a steady stream of men moved from the paymaster's window to the Blue Moon. Some of the smaller saloons got their usual share, but that was to be expected. As fast as the money came in, Cal car-

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ried it down a back street to the paymaster's office.

"You're sure working this money hard," the paymaster said. "Some of it's still warm from the boys' pockets and the girls' stockings."

Curiosity prompted Gorst and Shultz to saunter into the Blue Moon bar and order drinks. "The money's sure moving tonight," Gorst said. "I'd like to know where Gid Riley got it. Sharon assured me he was tied up. This forces my hand, now."

"It does?" asked Shultz, his attention on a pert blonde.

"Yes. We've got to play Sluice-box Charley. And he's an ace I was holding for later on. But I suppose it doesn't make any difference just so the ace takes the pot. Cross over to Cold Creek and get him. I hope for your sake *he* hasn't escaped."

Shultz made no comment. It was a sore point. Caboose Riley had eluded men detailed to sink him in the inlet, while they had been fighting the losing battle of Windy Gap. Gorst had had a search made, but Caboose had vanished without a trace, other than a drunken man's claim he had encountered his ghost.

Shultz crossed the inlet in a boat, poled it a half mile up Cold Creek, then walked a quarter mile over a game trail to a cabin built in a dense thicket.

Two men responded to his knock. "Gorst wants Sluice-box Charley," he told them.

"We'll wake him up," one of them said. "He's crazier than usual, except when he asks questions about his partner. He can't remember what happened to him."

"His partner has been hunting his body for weeks," said Shultz. "He thinks the old man wandered away while he was out on his trap line. He's going to be surprised when he learns he's alive."

They helped the muttering, bewildered old prospector into his clothes and cached a map showing country nearly a hundred miles distant marked Ruby River, and a moosehide poke filled with gold in his pockets. Then Shultz led him to the waiting boat.

It was two o'clock in the morning when the boat landed near Cold Creek, but the Blue Moon and other places were wide open. Shultz left Sluice-box Charley on the main street and two other Gorst men immediately took charge.

"Congratulations, old-timer," one of them shouted, with shaking hands, "you struck it, didn't you?"

"Struck it?" He shook his head with the bewilderment of the very old. "Struck it? No, I never struck it, but I know of a creek—" He began to speak in disconnected sentences. They let him ramble, knowing that in a few minutes he would have forgotten he had been held prisoner for many weeks and had been brought across the inlet in a boat.

"Sure you struck it," one of the men repeated. They searched his pockets and brought out the poke. "Look here, Charley, you struck it! Look at this!" They placed the heavy poke in his hand and let him enjoy the thrill of its weight. Then they opened the poke and poured some of the nuggets into his rough palm. "You hit it, Charley! See?"

THEY could feel him tremble with excitement. His mind might be foggy, but he recognized virgin gold. For years he had taken it from the ground in small quantities and the thrill of its feel ran deep. He tried to take a step toward the light of a

saloon window, but stumbled. The excitement began to weaken him. They helped him to the light and he looked at the gold a long time, then suddenly a sob of delirious happiness shook him.

"After all these years, I struck it! I knowed I'd hit her sooner or later. I knowed it, but it was so long in comin—so . . . long. You'll excuse an old man goin' all to pieces this way, but—hell!" He paused as a thought struck him. "I guess my thinker's gone wrong. Seems like I ferget just where I made the strike."

"Up on the headwaters of Ruby Creek," they told him. "Come on in, and we'll have a drink. Here's the Blue Moon, the best place in town."

"Always did want to buy drinks for the crowd," Sluice-box Charley said happily. "Never had the money, though. And now I . . . I've got it." He pushed his way through the doors and to the bar. "I struck it, boys! Drinks are on me. Bartender, set 'em up!" he yelled, his voice shaky with excitement.

He spilled gold on the bar, then pushed it toward the bartender. Everyone crowded around. The girls were forgotten. Marcia found herself singing to empty chairs.

The men drank at Sluice-box Charley's expense, then hoisted him on their shoulders. They demanded a speech, but he was too bewildered to understand. "Where'd you hit it? Let us in on it." Someone bellowed. The urge to stampede was like a fever and it grew stronger every moment.

"He had a map," a Gorst man shouted. "See if you've got that map in your pocket, Charley." The old man began to fumble, and the Gorst man took the map from his pocket and held it up for them all to see. "Headwaters of Ruby River," he yelled. "Boys, I'm off as soon as I can make up a pack. It's every man

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FREE details! Learn Original Cartooning! Raye Burns School, Studio S-1, Box 2194, Cleveland, Ohio.

for himself and the devil take the hindermost."

It was the cue for other Gorst men to take up the cry. "To hell with the railroad!" one roared. "I'm goin' to feather my nest while I can. No sense in workin' for wages when you can take a fortune out of the ground."

"The railroad's goin' busted anyway," another shouted. "I'm off for Ruby Creek!"

Sluice-box Charley was left sitting on the bar, while the men stormed into the night to arouse storekeepers. Everyone knew there wasn't enough grub to outfit them all, and it would be a case of first come, first served.

Marcia watched the excitement spread. Men were running wildly around passing the news to close friends and urging them to get in on the ground floor. In the morning the crews would be so depleted, Cal Jessup couldn't move a yard of earth nor lay a rail.

In despair Marcia ran to Cal's cabin. He had turned in shortly after midnight. "Cal, wake up!" she called, banging on the door.

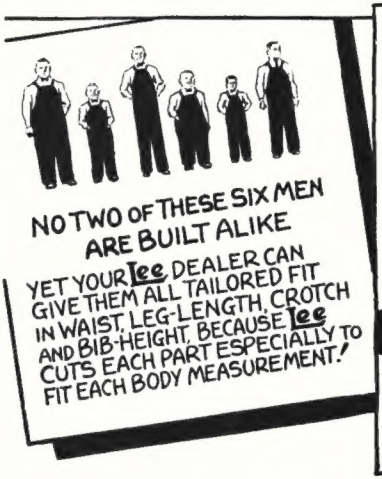
"Coming, Marcia," he answered. "What is it? What's all the talking about?" The blending of movements, of shouts and answers had created a steady uproar.

"Cal!" she cried in desperation, "some old prospector struck gold on Ruby River, and your crews are stampeding!"

"A stampede?" he groaned. "What rotten luck! All hell can't stop 'em now!"

With his men stampeding to Ruby River, how can Cal expect to complete the railroad on schedule? Has Gid Riley gone broke in the middle of his most ambitious venture? What has happened to Caboose? Read the answers to these questions in the fifth installment of this thrilling serial, appearing in next week's issue.

Believe It or Not! by Ripley



RIPLEY'S EXPLANATION: *Dragged A Mile Over Concrete Behind A Car.* A pillow inside his Lee overalls protected Gerald Hines, but the Jelt Denim seat, bearing his full 140 lb. weight took a full mile of concrete punishment without wearing through! Actually, men, this is *amazing proof* that Jelt Denim's multiple-twisted yarn *is tougher* and does give you longer, more economical wear!

J. C. Huffman's Trampled Overalls. J. C. Huffman is here shown in his overalls made, after laundering, from a piece of Jelt Denim on which 83,172 people, or 166,344 human feet walked! Looking almost like new, this amazing Lee overall demonstrates what Sanforized-Shrunk Jelt Denim, used only in Lee overalls, does for long wear and permanent fit—Believe It Or Not!

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